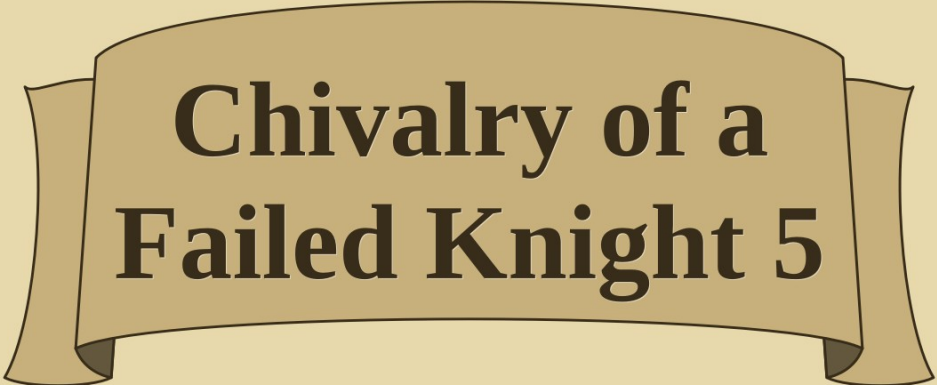




Chivalry of a Failed Knight 5

**Riku Misora
Won**

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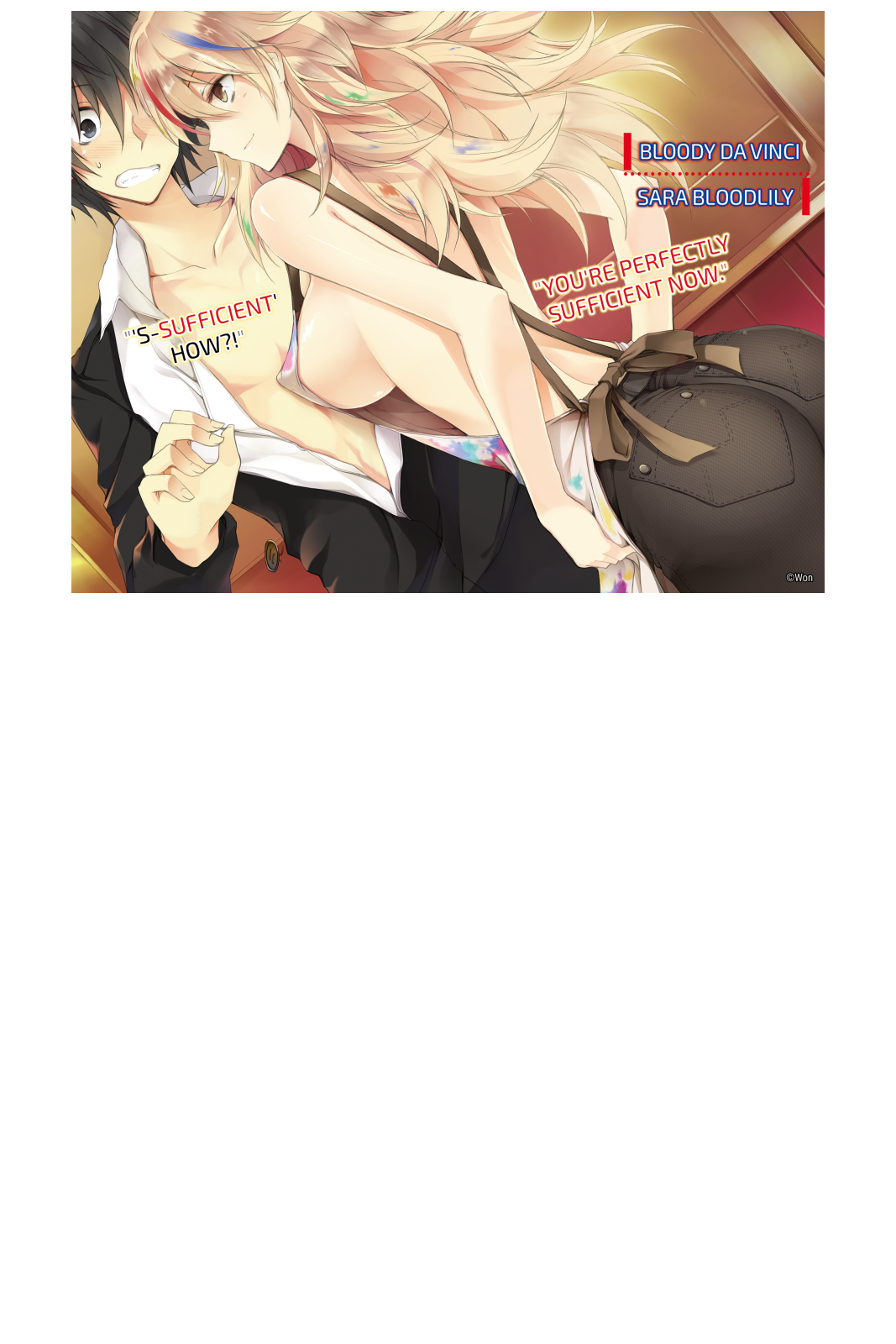
Riku Misora

Illust Won



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BLOODY DA VINCI

SARA BLOODLILY

"IS-SUFFICIENT"
HOW?!"

"YOU'RE PERFECTLY
SUFFICIENT NOW."

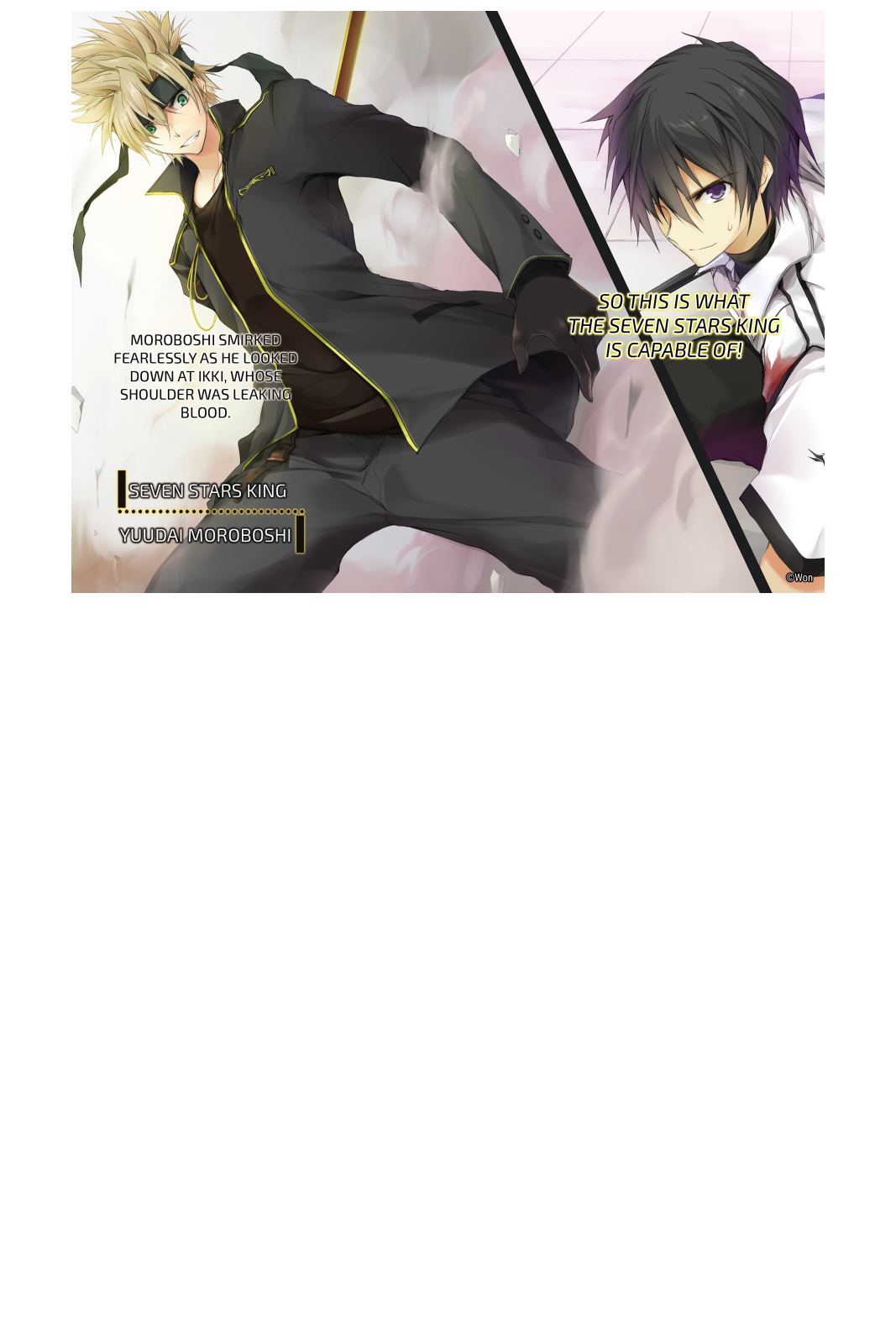


"Teehee♡ Hey there.
What do you say I give you
a quick pre-Battle physical
later? I might even throw
in a little bonus."

MEDICO KNIGHT

KIRIKO YAKUSHI

©Won



MOROBOSHI SMIRKED
FEARLESSLY AS HE LOOKED
DOWN AT IKKI, WHOSE
SHOULDER WAS LEAKING
BLOOD.

SEVEN STARS KING
YUUDAI MOROBOSHI

SO THIS IS WHAT
THE SEVEN STARS KING
IS CAPABLE OF!

Chivalry *of a* *Failed Knight*

VOL. 5

Original Story by Riku Misora

Illustrations by Won



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Prologue

The Drums of War

The establishment of National Akatsuki Academy as the first Blazer school sponsored by Japan, accompanied by Prime Minister Tsukikage's sudden announcement of its existence just days before the Seven Stars Battle Festival, sent enormous shockwaves throughout the world. But that was only natural. The member nations of the International Mage-Knight Federation traditionally entrusted control of the education of Blazers, the forefront of military strength, to the Federation. Tsukikage, however, rejected such tradition, publicly declaring that he would wrest that control from them and giving it to Japan by way of a school that would represent the nation itself. It was an utterly radical action, tantamount to a declaration of war against the Federation, and ultimately led to the birth of two factions within the country.

The first was, of course, against the prime minister's decision. Under the Federation, Japan had seen over fifty years of peace, and a great many people believed that such a blessing should not be so frivolously thrown asunder. Some even responded with revulsion at Tsukikage's exploitation of the government as a means to destroy both Hagun Academy and the climax of all student knights' school lives: the Seven Stars.

The other, then, supported Tsukikage's actions. To them, entrusting the nation's first line of defense to a foreign entity was bizarre. Opinions ranged from the belief that it was something that should fall under Japan's jurisdiction alone, with Tsukikage merely rectifying the mistakes of the past five decades, to the radical idea that Japan could become strong enough to join the ranks of Russia and America as a superpower all its own, independent of weak unions like the Federation.

Even those who were uninterested in politics found themselves voicing their opinions on what the prime minister had done.

"Tsukikage's way too aggressive. It makes me sick."

"All those naysayers are just exaggerating the attack on Hagun. Akatsuki's Devices were in Phantom Form, so nobody *actually* got hurt."

"I don't want my child being roped into fighting other people's

wars. Let's leave the Federation and make ourselves a peaceful nation."

"This country doesn't have the power to maintain its sovereignty alone. We should stay under the banner of the Federation."

"I heard Tsukikage is connected to those terrorists from the Rebellion! He can't be trusted!"

"It was a mistake to ever join the Federation."

Some bantered over drinks with friends. Some held water cooler gossip sessions. Some launched more active campaigns, going as far as protesting in the streets. But no matter their opinion, no matter their manner of discussion, every man, woman, and child could feel the billow that threatened to overturn the times.

Would Japan continue to exist as a member of the Federation, or would it stand on its own as an autonomous nation? Everyone felt that the answer was dependent on the result of the coming Seven Stars Battle Festival. If Tsukikage's own National Akatsuki Academy proved that its strength could measure up to his bold words, public opinion would lean toward leaving the Federation. If the other schools toppled Akatsuki, however, Tsukikage's words would stop carrying any weight.

The Festival had become far more important than it had ever been, poised to influence the very future of Japan. As the final few days leading up to the event passed, the participants drew more excitement and interest from spectators than any that came before them.



Chapter 1

National Powerhouses

Far removed from the center of Osaka, on the city's reclaimed coastline, existed a group of vacant buildings. A result of urban development from decades prior, the buildings had been successfully built, yet had failed to attract the enterprise they required. Standing tenantless and almost completely untouched, they were a continual reminder of immense failure.

That failure, however, had been miraculously undone, and the ashen ghost town was bursting with life. Stalls lined the streets, accompanied by the clamor of residents from every island that made up Japan. What could have brought so many people to such a desolate area? There was only one answer: in a mere two days, the Coastal Dome would host the annual Seven Stars Battle Festival, a tournament of student knights.

The Festival was a massive event, attracting more attention from the general public than even the King of Knights League. Around the time of the event each year, securing a room in a nearby hotel—let alone tickets to the event itself—was nigh impossible. Moreover, due in no small part to being embroiled in the Akatsuki Academy controversy following the attack on Hagun, the Festival that was preparing to take place had attracted more attention than any that had preceded it. The result was, inevitably, a far greater level of difficulty in finding accommodations.

Even two days before the start of the Festival, Japanese citizens and foreigners alike flooded the area, filling it with greater vigor than it had ever seen. But spectators weren't the only people rushing in. Many of the Festival's contestants had arrived long before the opening ceremony, using the competitors' lodgings to rest. One such person was Hagun Academy's team leader, Ikki Kurogane, carrying with him his academy's flag.

"Hmm. It just doesn't feel right."

In a refined hotel replete with fitting furnishings, Ikki shook his head as he looked upon himself in a full-length mirror. He wasn't wearing his usual student uniform: he'd donned a dark-blue tailcoat suit with matching bow tie and leather shoes so shiny that they sparkled, leaving him looking swanky from head to toe.

Of course, he wasn't wearing it because he enjoyed it. He was faced with certain circumstances that all but required him to wear such an outfit. That night, the night before the eve of the Festival, the Seven Stars' management committee was holding an invitational buffet for the students who had come to the Coastal Dome early. Ikki had selected his formal attire to attend that very function, but completing the look was a difficult, ongoing process.

Considering what this is for, I can't just go in there wearing my normal clothes. Ikki was unused to such formal wear, so no matter which of the committee-provided outfits he chose, he just didn't feel right. He found it so unlike him that he was worried people would laugh. *Maybe my spiky hair is part of the problem.*

With that in mind, Ikki attempted to part his usually bristled hair to the side with a comb.

"Oh. Well, better than before, at least."

The slight satisfaction he felt upon looking at himself again lasted for only a moment. His neatly combed hair quickly jumped back into its original position, as if defying him. *I walk my own path*, it taunted. *You'll not make demands of me.*

"Stubborn, aren't you?" he grumbled. He wouldn't wish his hairstyle on his worst enemy. Frustrated by his inability to find a look he liked, he removed his tailcoat.

No, that's not the one.

Though Ikki figured there wouldn't be much issue if he just wore the highest-class attire he could find, such fancy clothing was so ill-suited to who he was that not only did it feel like poor manners for him to wear it in public, but he also couldn't stand to see himself wearing it. After much time spent lost in thought, he grabbed a three-piece suit from among the clothing lent to him.

"Maybe this would be best."

It was clearly the boring, safe option, but Ikki didn't have the fashion sense nor the skill to accentuate his individuality. To make matters worse, he was running out of time, as there wasn't long until the party began. His best option was to change back into the three-piece suit, which he quickly did. Shortly after, he heard a knock at the door.

"Big Brother, may I come in?"

Outside was his younger sister and fellow contestant in the Seven Stars, Shizuku Kurogane. Considering how long he was taking to get ready, she had probably come to check up on him.

While scoffing at himself for taking longer to get ready than a teenage girl, Ikki glanced at the full-length mirror to ensure that he was presentable before answering her question. In doing so, he found that his lower half was fully covered, but that the buttons of his shirt

were not yet fastened, leaving his stomach exposed. He would have hesitated if he were opening the door for a friend, but as the person on the other side was his sibling, he figured it wasn't a problem.

"Hey, sorry," he responded through the door. "I'm pretty much ready, so you can come in."

"Coming in." The door opened almost immediately, ushering in the silver-haired girl. "I've finished getting rea...dy...?"

Shizuku froze in the doorway, almost forgetting to finish her sentence. Her jade eyes were wide open, as if she were surprised by something. Confused about her reaction, Ikki raised an eyebrow, but his attention was quickly diverted to something else: Shizuku's attire.

Wow. She looks amazing.

Shizuku was attending the party as a fellow competitor, so she too was wearing an outfit given to her by the committee. Her dress was made of a high-quality fabric of an almost perfect black, with elaborate lace frills adorning the bustier like flower petals. The neckline was open to reveal the entirety of her shoulders, creating a striking contrast between the dress and her snow-white skin.

It was the sort of outfit that would normally be too mature for someone who looked as young as Shizuku. Instead, however, her tastefully applied makeup made her look much older, erasing any traces of incongruence. Her roommate and friend, Nagi Alisuin, had most likely coordinated the outfit. In fact, that was practically a foregone conclusion. Ikki honestly applauded the beautiful outfit worn by his sister, whose ladylike maturity was on full display.

"I know it's clichéd, but you look gorgeous, Shizuku."

"Gyah!"

The moment he said that, Shizuku's face turned bright-red. A drop of fresh blood rolled out of her tiny nose, and she fell backward.

"Sh-Shizuku?!"

"Eek! Emergency!"

Alice leaped in to support Shizuku's falling body with her right hand, using her left to grab a handkerchief, holding it against Shizuku's nose such that no blood would get on her dress.

"What's wrong, Shizuku?! Are you okay?!"

Shocked at his sister's sudden fall, Ikki ran over to check on her.

"A-Ah... Ahhh!"

It was the worst decision he could have made. Every step he took caused her to quake more and the handkerchief to turn redder. Her reaction shouldn't have come as a surprise, however, as Shizuku Kurogane loved her brother as a member of the opposite sex. She had no way to handle the feeling of her ever-so-beloved brother, his abdomen bared by his ruffled clothing, calling her gorgeous. He, not

realizing the genderlessness of eroticism, merely continued to run toward her.

“Ikki, don’t come any closer! And cover up your abs first!”

Alice, on the other hand, understood what was happening to Shizuku right away, and halted Ikki’s advance.

“Huh? Huh?!”

“Hurry! Before her dress gets bloody!”

“Uh, okay! Got it!”

Ikki still didn’t know what was wrong with himself, but after being driven back by the incredible urgency in Alice’s voice, he rushed to fix his clothes. Once he had done that, Shizuku was finally able to calm down.

“Haah, haah... I’m sorry you had to see that. But Big Brother, that was a little too sexy for me.”

“I don’t really get how, but sorry. I didn’t find any outfits I liked, so I wasn’t quite done getting ready.”

“Do you not like that suit? I think you look very spiffy in it.”

“Y-You think so? I feel really uncomfortable wearing it. It’s like I’m a kid pretending to be an adult.”

“Oh, don’t be like that,” Alice joined in from behind her friend. “You have such broad shoulders that a suit is perfect for you.”

The suit Alice wore seemed perfectly tailor-made for her tall figure. She was so well-dressed that she looked like a member of a host club—at least, what Ikki imagined a member of a host club would look like, considering he’d never met one. Regardless, it didn’t mean much to Ikki to be complimented by her when she looked so much better than he did.

How could Alice have been so much taller than him when he was a year older than her, anyway? Considering that she’d lied about her past, though, maybe *she* was actually a year older than *him*? With those thoughts swirling around in his brain, Ikki pointed at Alice’s suit and posed her a question.

“Does this mean you’re coming to the party, too?”

“Who, me?” She shook her head in denial. “I’m not a representative anymore. I *am* meeting up with Kagamin for the private reporters’ party, though.”

“You’re like Kusakabe’s assistant now, huh?”

“I have to repay my debt, and this is just the start. I can’t say no to her,” Alice shrugged in response to Shizuku’s question.

The debt Alice sought to repay was related to Akatsuki Academy’s attack on Hagun. As she had been a member of that organization, she was once an enemy. She had even gone so far as to directly attack Kagami, albeit with her weapon in Phantom Form. To

make amends for what she'd done, she was allowing Kagami to use her as her right-hand woman. Ikki, however, figured it was just Kagami's way of being nice.

The attack on Hagun by Akatsuki Academy had been carried out with all the perpetrators' weapons in Phantom Form, but as Prime Minister Bakuga Tsukikage was the one pulling the strings, the reason for that was clearly that he didn't want to hurt his constituents. Despite the lack of physical scars that had been left, however, the sheer terror the victims felt had left mental scars that were difficult to erase—it had led two of Hagun's Seven Stars representatives, the Hagure sisters, to drop out of the tournament for fear of what they would face. Moreover, Touka Toudou and Utakata Misogi had been left comatose by a single blow from the Gale Sword Emperor. They were temporary comas induced by incredible fatigue, so everyone knew that there was no real danger to their lives, but comas nonetheless.

As a former member of the group responsible, Alice felt an immense sense of responsibility that was goaded even further by her humility. To keep her from ruminating on it too much, Kagami had given her a nominal punishment. But Alice was keen to the inner workings of others' minds, and was well aware of Kagami's consideration for her. Still, she acted as though she were unaware and continued to pay her dues.

Maybe it's because Alice sees Kagami as someone she can really lean on.

Ikki believed that it would have been incredible if their relationship could return to the way it had once been, but his thoughts were interrupted. The clock hanging in his room chimed a dull tone, informing him that it was 6:00 p.m. It was time for the party.

"Wow, time flies. Let's get going, Shizuku."

"Yes, Big Brother."

"Wait a sec, you two." Alice stopped the pair before they could depart. Just as Ikki went to ask the reason, she used the camera in her electronic student handbook to snap a picture of them. "Since you two dressed up so nice, I wanted a memento."

She skillfully operated her handbook to send the picture to both of its subjects. Upon seeing it, Shizuku flushed with joy.

"Wow! Thank you, Alice! I'll treasure it forever!"

Forever? Jeez...

Ikki was much less excited. He just didn't feel comfortable being in formal clothes, and he looked all the more hilarious next to Shizuku, who wore her outfit perfectly. Maybe he would appreciate the photo more when he got older.

"I don't expect Akatsuki to be at the party, but be careful anyway."

“We appreciate the thought.”

Despite Ikki’s mixed feelings, the two walked onward to the venue after thanking Alice for the message she’d sent alongside the image.



The representatives’ party was being held in a reception hall on the top floor of the hotel being used as the students’ lodging. It was on such a high floor that taking the stairs was infeasible, so Ikki and Shizuku used the elevator instead. The entire way up, Shizuku gazed at the photo Alice had taken with a pleased expression.

“Heehee.”

“Do you really like it that much?”

“I do. I’ve already set it as my lock screen.”

“Did you now?”

If I have to go to another party like this, I’m definitely wearing my uniform, Ikki swore to himself with a chuckle. He never wanted to wear another outfit as ill-suited to him as the one he had on.

“I can’t stop myself from laughing when I think of how I’ll get to brag to Stella about this.”

Despite his promise to himself, however, Ikki knew that he would be made to wear one again at some point in his future.

“Don’t get her too worked up.”

“No promises. Besides, it’s her fault for not being here.”

Shizuku was correct; Stella still hadn’t made it to Osaka.

Originally, the plan was for Hagun’s representatives to all be present at the party, but according to Director Kurono Shinguuji, Stella was staying behind to continue her training with the Demon Princess for as long as she possibly could.

During the fight with Akatsuki Academy, Stella was defeated in battle by the Gale Sword Emperor, Ouma Kurogane. Adding insult to injury, she was defeated in a battle of raw power, the area she prided herself on the most. It was a major blow to her confidence—one that she was struggling heavily to recover from. Her training with the Demon Princess was probably an attempt to grasp at some thread of confidence by fighting the strongest Mage-Knight in all of Hagun.

“Do you think this training will make Stella stronger?” Shizuku lobbed a question at Ikki, her voice betraying signs of uncertainty. “The Seven Stars is only two days away. This time is meant for students to rest off their fatigue. I can’t imagine any point in wasting that time for some superficial training. I can somewhat understand her impatience, but I think she may have made her decision too lightly.”

No, the emotion that tinged her voice wasn’t uncertainty.

Shizuku was deeply concerned for Stella, expecting that the last-minute training would only make things worse. She feared that Stella wouldn't be able to start the Festival off on the right foot.

"You're sweet, Shizuku."

"Wha—?!" A fire seemed to blaze in Shizuku's cheeks as she looked away. "I-I'm not worried about *her* one bit. I only brought it up because you were excited about getting to fight her. The only person I'm worried about is you."

Shizuku's annoyed protests were only further proof of their own falsehood. Even if the girls were constantly at each other's throats, Ikki could see the friendship that had forged between them. That didn't mean it was something she wanted him to point out, though.

"So, can she get stronger with so little time left before the Festival?" Shizuku asked again.

"I think it'll be tough; there's just no time. It might just make her even more fatigued, to the point that she won't be in top form for her battles."

Ikki shared his honest feelings with Shizuku, admitting that he too was apprehensive about Stella's decision. Short-term, focused training did sometimes lead to results, so it was possible that she would benefit from it, but that was almost exclusively true for amateurs.

It was Ikki's belief that mastering something was like climbing a mountain. The climb from the base to the first checkpoint was gentle enough that one could run the length of it, hence amateurs could achieve dramatic strength gains in a short time. Once the climber had gotten seventy to eighty percent of the way to the peak, however, things would change. Just as a mountain became steeper as one got closer to the summit, the peak of strength became more difficult to reach as one ascended toward it. Every step, every yard required exponentially more effort despite being the same as the last, but giving that effort was a necessity if one was to reach the top.

"Anyone can tell that Stella isn't an amateur," Ikki continued. Following his belief, for someone of her power level to become stronger would require appropriate time and effort. Her week of rigorous training wouldn't be enough to help.

"Yeah... Honestly, what was she thinking?" Shizuku muttered half-sympathetically and half-annoyedly, her eyebrows drooping slightly. Even Ikki thought it was reckless, confirming her fears, so her reaction was natural.

"That would only apply to her if she were a normal person, though."

"Huh?!"

Ikki wasn't finished with his thoughts. Both he and Shizuku

agreed that what Stella was doing was reckless, and neither of them would have made the same decision, but there was more to it than that.

“Think about it. This the Crimson Princess—the Stella Vermillion we’re talking about. With potential like hers, she’s probably not even at the first checkpoint yet.”

“Ah...!”

Ikki knew better than anyone that talent was not divided equally among all people. Every person’s strength peaked at a different height, and Stella’s peak was the highest of them all. The sheer size and majesty of her mountain was far greater than that of Ikki’s or Shizuku’s—high enough to pierce the clouds, insurmountably steep, and beyond the measure of any scale they possessed.

“She can still make explosive gains this week.” Ikki loved Stella deeply—he was closer to her than anyone else in the world. That was why he was certain that she would be more powerful than she’d ever been when she returned. “I think she’ll prove that for herself two days from now.”

“I hope you’re right, because... I’d like to fight her as well. It would be very disappointing if her fire went out because she overexerted herself.”

Just as Shizuku responded with a somewhat more cheerful tone, the elevator finally reached the hotel’s top floor.



When the metallic elevator doors opened, a porter greeted the siblings with a natural, amicable smile.

“Ikki and Shizuku Kurogane from Hagun Academy, yes? The party is just up ahead. Please, make your way inside.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Ikki and Shizuku walked the crimson carpet toward the door ahead of them. Even on their approach, the clamor of numerous conversations could be heard beyond it. The party was already in full swing.

Are all the schools’ representatives in that room?

Ikki gulped audibly. The mere thought sent his heart into a frenzy.

“You look excited, Big Brother.”

“All my life, I could only dream of coming here.”

It was no secret that Stella was his ultimate goal, but it wasn’t just her that he was excited to fight. Beyond that door were some of the most powerful warriors from all over the country, all of them a cut above him, a Rank F knight. Each one was an opponent he could truly

test his mettle against. The thought of finally getting to battle them made his blood boil; he became impatient with excitement.

Why had he put on a suit, his least favorite type of outfit, and come to a party that he wasn't even required to attend? It was because the Worst One wanted to see the people he would fight in the flesh, and he wanted to see them as soon as he possibly could.

"Then again, it's not like any of them would care about a Rank F like me."

The upcoming Festival had two Rank A knights as representatives: Stella and Ouma. It only made sense for everyone's focus to be on them. That, however, actually worked in Ikki's favor—he decided that he should consider it his golden opportunity.

Every single foe he would face was among the best student knights in Japan; there was no question that they were all leagues above him in terms of actual strength. The Worst One's fights hinged solely on how well he could leverage his failure's talent to defeat someone stronger than him. He had no qualms with the idea of an opponent underestimating him because of that and charging in foolishly.

With those thoughts in his mind, Ikki pushed open the door that separated him from the excited hustle and bustle of the party. There, in a matter of seconds, all of his expectations were proven wrong. The very moment he entered, the commotion quickly turned to silence as gaze upon gaze struck him like a shockwave. Their attention and silence were brief, however, with the noise returning as quickly as it had disappeared. When it did, though, it was different.

"That's Worst One! He's the guy who beat Raikiri!"

"I knew he'd have quite the air about him. Nice and sharp, like a well-honed blade. I love it."

"He's definitely at the national level. Maybe even higher!"

"You can tell just by looking at him that he's tough—he gives off that sort of aura. What was Hagun's last director thinking, flunking a guy like him?"

The voices that Ikki could pick out made it all too clear that the gazes that seemed to pierce through him had done precisely that.

"Wow." Next to Ikki, Shizuku quickly judged the mood in the room and broke out into a smile. "I guess once people get this strong, they can ascertain your true strength with one look."

Maybe I was the one doing the underestimating, Ikki said to himself, chuckling just quietly enough for Shizuku not to hear. What a naïve idea it was that others might let their guard down around him.

The people before him were more than just the top students in

the country: they were warriors who had come to the Seven Stars undaunted by the threat posed by Akatsuki Academy. Not one of them would be foolish enough to let their guard down because of something as arbitrary as ranking.

Everyone at the party could ascertain their enemy's strength with ease. There was such a stark contrast between them and his opponents during Hagun's selection battles that it forced him to recognize exactly where he was: a place where he could finally test the true limits of his potential. He was where Japan's best student knights would all vie for the top.

I've finally made it.

"Ah! B-Big Brother!" While he trembled with excitement at his realization, Shizuku suddenly tugged at the hem of his suit jacket.

"Hmm? What's up?"

"L-Look!"

Shizuku pointed to a table housing food for the partygoers. Standing in front of it was a girl, her eyes darting around the room as if she were searching for someone. The moment he saw her, Ikki understood why Shizuku was so shocked.

That's...!

The girl's blonde hair was disheveled, with various colors of paint mixed in. She was topless despite being out in public, her ample breasts hidden only by a dingy apron. By no stretch of the imagination was her appearance what one would consider "normal", making her entirely unforgettable. She was, without a doubt, a member of the group that had attacked their school.

"Akatsuki Academy's Bloody da Vinci—Sara Bloodlily!"

"She's got some nerve, coming to this party after all they've done."

Akatsuki Academy's student body was made up of powerful terrorists who worked under the Rebellion. As a result of Tsukikage and his government's information-spinning, however, very few people knew of that connection. Regardless, what Shizuku said was correct: it was incredibly audacious of her to show her face after what she and her group had done to Hagun Academy.

Their act sent tremors through not just Hagun, but all of Japan's Mage-Knight schools as well, leading several students to drop out of the Festival. All seven schools held some sort of grudge toward them because of that, made evident by the fact that all of the participants were refusing to acknowledge Sara's presence. The ill-will everyone held for them was so great that Ikki had been sure that none of the Akatsuki students were going to attend the event.

They're either ridiculously strong or completely fearless.

The moment Ikki finished his thought, Sara's eyes fixed on him.
"Huh?"

As if she'd found the person she'd been searching all over for, she immediately made a beeline toward him. She then stared directly, wordlessly at Ikki, standing close enough to him that he could hear her breathing.

"Hmm..."

Wh-What is she doing?!

"Um, can I help you?"

Ikki was bewildered by Sara's abrupt advance. The distance between them was so small that he could see himself reflected in her eyes; surely she must have wanted something from him. The two hardly knew each other, though, so he had no idea what it could possibly have been. Nonetheless, Sara continued to stare at his face.

"...Good," she whispered, both her face and voice emotionless. She then began touching Ikki all over his shoulders and chest as if she were giving him a pat-down.

"Wha—?! H-Hang on a second!"

"Ex-cuse me! Just what do you think you're doing?!"

"Quiet. I'm focusing."

Ignoring Ikki and Shizuku's protests outright, Sara traced a finger over Ikki's clothing, the contours of his body. It was dangerous for him to let a woman like her—a terrorist who had already carried out an attack—feel him up the way she was. He knew as much, and yet...

She's serious about this. I can feel how hard she's focusing.

...he sensed no malice or other negative emotion in her actions. She seemed so focused, in fact, that he hesitated to stop her. Because of that hesitation, instead of forcefully pulling himself free of the girl, Ikki waited. He decided to try to figure out what she was so seriously searching for. Before he could, however, Sara ripped open his shirt from under his suit jacket.

"Whoa, what?!"

"B-Big Brother?!"

That was more than enough to prompt Ikki to finally leap away from her. He covered his bare chest and demanded answers from her.

"What are you doing?!" he cried.

"You're perfectly sufficient now," she muttered incomprehensibly, her cheeks red as if she were feverish.

"'S-Sufficient' how?! Seriously, *what* is going on?!"

"Back when we first met, it was love at first sight. Your features invoke a sense of beauty and gentleness, but there's such distinct power hidden beneath them. The straightness of your spine makes your posture terrific. And even better, your muscles are well-honed without being needlessly large. It's all just so magnificent. You may be

my ideal man.”

“H-Huh?!”

The sudden string of compliments had Ikki at a loss. He hadn’t the slightest clue what was going on. Was she confessing her love to him or something?

What on earth is happening?!

Under the weight of Sara’s gaze, Ikki was paralyzed. Things had escalated too quickly for him to keep up with, and he was struggling to figure out how to respond. No. He was already dating Stella, so he knew exactly what his response would be—if only he were able to give it.

Sara’s expression was one of complete, deadly seriousness. Every member of Rebellion was scary, but her even more so than any of the others he’d encountered. For someone who could cast aside doubt and be direct at all times, Ikki’s inability to react was incredibly out of character.

“You’d make for the best nude model. Perfectly sufficient. So, I’ll need you to come to my room and strip for me.”

“What?! No! I refuse! I never signed up for this!”

“Wrong answer. I refuse your refusal.”

“How selfish can you be?!”

“If you won’t take your clothes off willingly, I’ll just tear them off of you.”

As Sara spoke, magic began to emanate from her entire body, and her Device—a palette and paintbrush—took form in her hands.

Wait, she’s serious?!

She earnestly intended to rip the clothes right off of Ikki, to the point that she had taken up arms. Even so, Ikki couldn’t start a fight with her; they were still very much at a party. Instead, unsure of how to stop her, he began to panic.

“Get away from my brother, you pervert!”

“Gah!”

Shizuku wasted no time in sending Sara rocketing sideways. She then stood in front of her brother, protecting his modesty.

“Big Brother, are you okay?”

What she’d done was incredible. Where she could have merely kicked Sara, she had instead performed a flying dropkick to launch the molester away. She was certainly a reliable ally.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” Ikki responded to Shizuku’s concern with a nod. “I think she just tore a button off my shirt.”

“Grr!” That answer caused all of her hair to stand on end. “She won’t get away with this.”

“Sh-Shizuku?”

“I’ve never gotten to jump on you and tear your clothes off! Not

even once!” Perhaps Shizuku wasn’t as reliable an ally as she seemed. She gave Ikki, who couldn’t decide whether to be thankful or afraid, only a sidelong glance before letting her rage get the better of her. She materialized her own Device and turned her attention toward Sara.

“You! I’ll kill you!”

“What the—?! Shizuku, no! Don’t use your Device here!”

The situation was dire, leaving Ikki no time to spare. He leaped behind Shizuku and pulled her into a full nelson, stopping her dead in her tracks. With her low body weight and physical strength, she had no way to free herself, rendering her unable to cause a tragedy. That, however, created another issue.

Ugh, I can feel everyone staring at us...

The amount of noise they three of them had made was more than enough to draw the attention of the entire room. Ikki’s best course of action was to take Shizuku and make his escape, which worked out since he needed to change clothes anyway. Just as he made that decision, the soprano tone of someone’s voice, exaggerated as if to threaten those who heard it, reached his ears from nearby.

“Heheheh. Of *course* you’re the cause of this mess, Bloody da Vinci.”



On turning to look at the source of the voice, Ikki found a girl with an eyepatch and a crimson dress, a maid standing behind her. As he had with Sara, he remembered the pair’s faces. They were also members of the group that had attacked Hagun.



"I remember you. Kazamatsuri, originally from Rentei Academy, right?"

The eyepatched girl returned a nod.

"Heheheh, I suppose you could say that you're correct. That name and this attire are merely temporary, however—meant only to fool the Dimensional Administration Bureau. My *true* name cannot be spoken in any human language."

"What my master means to say is the following: 'Yes, it's nice to meet you.' It would seem I have not introduced myself, either. I am my master's personal maid, Charlotte Corday. A pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"Oh, um, that's very polite of you."

With graceful carriage, Charlotte greeted Ikki and Shizuku with a bow. Her self-introduction reminded Ikki that she was the only one whose face he hadn't recognized during the attack. The others were all students who had taken representative spots at their respective schools—Ikki had seen them in pictures Kagami had shown him—but as Charlotte was an attendant, she was far from being a representative. In fact, she wasn't even a Blazer.

"Apologies for my compatriot, Worst One. She has been possessed by her Muse, turning her into an endless fount of inspiration. Forgive her, for she means no harm. Lorelei, stay your blade. The battle has already ended."

"What the—?" Ikki and Shizuku looked in the direction Sara had been launched. There she lay, with her limbs sprawled out atop the carpet. "Did she pass out?"

"Charlotte," Kazamatsuri said, "carry her to the Casket of Rebirth."

"Very well. Excuse me, Lady Sara. I'm going to carry you to an iPS Capsule now."

"Blrgh..."

As Charlotte picked her up, Sara swooned and before finally losing what little remained of her consciousness. Though she had been hit with a flying dropkick, it had been delivered by Shizuku, who was probably one of the lightest and physically weakest people among all the competitors in the Festival. Ikki and Shizuku didn't bother to hide their surprise at how weak she was for supposedly being one of the strongest people in the underworld.

"The Bloody da Vinci is an artist, not a warrior," Kazamatsuri explained. "Someone like her will always be weak. Not even her arrival at this venue was of her own power; denizens of hell seized her legs along the way and tried to drag her in with them. It was angels in white that carried her here."

"What my master means to say is the following: 'When Sara came

to Osaka, she tripped over the sidewalk and fractured a bone. She was brought here in an ambulance.”

“Are her bones made of glass or something?”

“That is why her nickname is Bloody da Vinci.”

“That meant her *own* blood?! She suddenly sounds really lame!”

“Was the Rebellion short on fighters, by any chance?” Shizuku whispered quizzically to Ikki, to whom the same thought had occurred. They couldn’t fathom how someone like her had gotten into the Seven Stars Battle Festival.

“Heheheh, you seem to be missing the point.” Beast Tamer Rinna Kazamatsuri laughed derisively at them. “Indeed, the Bloody da Vinci is horribly weak. But that does not mean that she is nothing more than weak. The fact that she was chosen for our grand strategy is proof that she can excel.”

“Uh...”

“Though art can be grouped into categories like ‘realistic’ or ‘abstract’, it’s no more than a replica of the reality created by that annoyance known as God. The Bloody da Vinci’s art, however, is an exception. Her art *creates* reality. Compared to her, God is little more than an amateur. You’d best not attack her carelessly.”

Kazamatsuri’s words reminded Ikki and Shizuku of the glimpse of Sara’s skills that they’d seen during the attack. Her puppets, made in the image of the Akatsuki members, were nothing short of flawless recreations that had looked, spoken, and even acted exactly the same as the attackers themselves. That flawlessness was the reason Ikki had seen through their trap, but that didn’t make them any less perfect.

She’s not the kind of enemy I should make light of—especially since we’re in the same tournament block.

How her art would affect a battle was still unknown, and that made her all the more ominous. He had to make sure he stayed on his guard. If all went well for both of them, they would face each other in the third round of the Festival. Though Ikki’s caution had abated due to her surprising weakness, he once again braced himself.

“However, I must admit that the Bloody da Vinci has good taste. Now that I see you up close, you’re very aesthetically pleasing, Worst One.”

With actions reminiscent of a small mammal, Kazamatsuri looked up at Ikki from her low vantage point.

“Huh?”

“A mask not pointlessly peremptory, yet backed with unimaginable strength. That’s just what I like. Why don’t you become my butler once you graduate? You’ll be paid handsomely.”

“Hrk! You’re after my brother too?! I won’t allow it!”

"I'm not just gonna up and join the terrorists no matter how much you pay me."

"You need not join the Rebellion. I will be satisfied with you simply tending to my belongings at my mansion."

"Don't be fooled, Big Brother! This is obviously just a pretense! She's planning to use your master-servant relationship to force you to do obscene things! I certainly would!"

Uh-oh. I think my sister might be more dangerous than the terrorists.

Leaving her strange comments aside, Ikki knew his answer to Kazamatsuri's invitation, and wasted no time in giving it.

"Sorry, but I have to decline your kind offer. I can't stand wearing a suit."

"Hmm... Proper work is probably unsatisfying for someone whose battles always end so favorably. But so be it! Capitulate to me, and you will forever have all the victuals you desire!"

"Master, you mustn't continue to coerce him," Charlotte interjected. "Master Ikki is clearly confused."

Kazamatsuri being a member of a terrorist organization was a major factor in Ikki's choice to decline, of course, but there was more to it than that: Charlotte had worn the same unperturbed expression throughout the groups' entire meeting, but with her master's demand that he join her, she began looking upon him with jealous rage.

Had I said yes to that, Charlotte would definitely have killed me somewhere down the line.

No matter how good the pay, Ikki had no intention of working somewhere where he was in danger of being assassinated.

"Rgh, fine," Kazamatsuri reluctantly pouted, apparently not quite ready to give up. "But if you ever change your mind, feel free to contact me. I'll always welcome someone as capable as you, Worst One."

She handed Ikki her card. He had no desire whatsoever to be a butler, but turning down someone's card would have been rude, so he took it and thanked her.

With their exchange ended, Kazamatsuri and Charlotte lifted Sara's lifeless body and carried her away from the party venue. Ikki saw the three of them off, then looked at the card and chuckled. It had not just her name, but also her phone number, email address, and even her mailing address.

"Can't say I planned on getting a terrorist's card today."

"They're quite the odd bunch. Even though they're criminals, they came to this party, started stripping you, and even tried to recruit you. Do you think everyone in the Rebellion is just as strange?"

"I mean, Alice is pretty out there."

The people who were chosen as representatives of society's

underbelly certainly differed from the commonplace image of dark assassins. Though Ikki knew that one's true strength couldn't be judged from their appearance alone, after having been through so much hardship at their hands, he had imagined that they would have been much more terrifying. In fact, he couldn't shake some measure of disappointment.

"Don't lump me in with those idiots. You'll make me mad."

Ikki's thoughts were interrupted by an objection from behind. When he and Shizuku turned toward the voice that dripped with anger, they found a girl with long black hair, her eyes hidden by a vulgar mask.



"Look at you all, having so much fun. You don't even realize that you're not so respectable yourselves," the girl, her face partially hidden by a mask, muttered angrily in the direction of the reception room door Kazamatsuri and the others had left through.

"I suppose you're Yui Tatara from Akatsuki Academy?"

"Oh, that's right. You're the idiot who was wearing that heavy coat in the middle of summer."

Shizuku had had no idea who the stranger was until Ikki mentioned her name. The coat had blocked her view of the girl's face before, but as soon as he said something, she realized that the heights matched perfectly.

"I'm no idiot," Tatara responded in an unhappy tone. "The dumb ones are the assassins who let the whole world see their faces."

Finally, one of them said something that makes sense!

Shizuku was somewhat shocked. Compared to the other two, Tatara was a much more normal killer—insofar as a killer was capable of being "normal", at least.

"So we can assume you're an assassin, then? Even if the public sees you as just a normal student?"

The bluntness of that question caused Tatara to laugh contemptuously.

"Geheheh. You've heard it all from the Black Assassin already. Tsukikage's ability to spin the information that goes around Japan is perfect, too. No matter how much you complain, the world will see it as nonsense—no ifs, ands, or buts about it."

"Rgh..."

That answer made Shizuku's eyebrows tense up in anger, for Tatara's claim was undeniably accurate. The fact that Akatsuki Academy's students were all Rebellion members should have been communicated by Kurono through the proper channels, yet it had not been communicated to the world at large.

Japan's government actively manipulated any information that was made public, but worse than that, the idea that their own prime minister was connected to terrorists was simply too absurd for anyone to buy into. As a result, the only people who knew and believed the truth about Akatsuki were those connected to the events that had put them in the public eye.

For people like Shizuku—people who knew the truth—the situation was beyond irritating, as they had been caught wholly in their enemy's scheming. It was enough in and of itself to annoy her, but to be told as much in such a teasing manner made her all the more unhappy. Tatara took notice of the change in Shizuku's expression, so she put some food on a plate and offered it to her.

"Keheh. Don't look so upset, now, Kurogane girl. My bad for pulling your leg. But I'm off work today, so let's have fun at this little get-together."

Her behavior on its own seemed friendly, but she made no attempt at hiding the contempt that dripped from her lips as she spoke. Where her words ended, so too did her apology. It did nothing but make Shizuku even more furious, but falling for such an obvious trap would bother her yet more, so Shizuku told herself to just let it go.

"Thank you." Just as she tried to take the plate, it flew through the air and crashed onto the marble floor. Ikki had smacked the plate out of Tatara's hand. "B-Big Brother?"

Shizuku's eyes went wide at his sudden action. She wasn't the only one startled by his actions, either; all of the students around them were watching with fascination.

In response to the attention, Ikki wordlessly glared at Tatara, his eyes filled with a cold light. He seemed like an entirely different person than he'd been just minutes before, but what had caused such a sudden change? Shizuku looked over at the scattered food and immediately understood the reason for what he'd done.

"Th-That's...!"

On the plate that Tatara had offered her had been a bone-in chicken leg. Inside the meat, faintly reflecting light, was a razor blade, likely only protruding from it due to the impact of the fall.

That couldn't possibly have found its way into the chicken while it was being cooked; someone had clearly placed it inside with malicious intent. Only one person would have done that: the terrorist standing in front of them. Having expected as much from her, Ikki had knocked the plate away.

"That's one hell of a seasoning, Tatara."

"Geheheh, shame. I coated that thing with enough alkaloids to

drop an elephant.” Unafraid of the daggers in Ikki’s glare, Tatara laughed so hard that her shoulders shook. “And just when I was starting to think I’d done a good job of hiding it. Oh well, at least *you’ve* got good instincts, unlike your sister here.”

“I don’t need your praise. There’s so much spite oozing out of you that it was obvious you were up to something.”

Ikki’s words weren’t a sign of humility. Shizuku didn’t realize it, but he’d known from the get-go that Yui Tatara was different from the three they’d spoken to earlier. Those girls may have been strange, but there had been no reason for him to feel malice coming from them. That was where Tatara differed—malice was the sole emotion that Ikki could find within her.

Even more suspicious, though, was that when she’d been putting food on the plate, she had used her body to hide what she was doing from Ikki and Shizuku. That alone had made it easy for Ikki to come to the conclusion that she was up to no good, leading him to remove the food from the equation. The result was just what he’d expected.

“I thought you said you were off work today,” he continued in a sharp tone.

“Geheheh, yeah, I am. I just wanted to kill a girl or two to blow off some steam. Man, I was so close, too.” Far from being embarrassed that her evil had been revealed, Tatara was unabashed, even cursing the fact that her plans were foiled. “I’ve never had a job that was this much of a pain in the ass. ‘Attack the school, but don’t hurt anyone’? Seriously? I’m not like them; I’ve been killing ever since I learned to walk. You don’t give an assassin like me a job like that. I’m going mad from the frustration! I can’t wait two whole days. I gotta kill someone right now!”

Tatara smiled disconcertingly, revealing one of her canine teeth. In her right hand, ominous magic collected until it took form, becoming a chainsaw with horrifying, shark-like cutting teeth.

“H-Hey, is she for real?!”

“Is she seriously tryna start somethin’ here?!”

The venue was filled with the crowd’s screams as they bore witness to Tatara’s savagery. Ikki didn’t reply, however, instead standing in front of Shizuku to guard her. He knew that Tatara wasn’t the kind of person who could be swayed by words, and most of all, he wasn’t the kind of person to let someone off the hook after attacking his sister. Ready to meet her attack, he took up Intetsu.

“Stop this, Another One.”

“Gh!”

Upon hearing someone address him from behind, he immediately

stopped himself, though perhaps it was because the person's very voice had forced him to. It was not a shout, nor did it seem to be backed with anger. Instead, it was gentle, yet it had a compelling pressure to it. There was a distinct sense of presence within it—one that didn't take no for an answer.

It was a voice that Ikki recognized. He had never heard it in person, but he'd heard it over the television countless times.

"You didn't claw your way here just to pick meaningless fights, did you? C'mon."

"Moroboshi!"

Just as he'd thought, the source of the voice was none other than the conqueror of the previous year's Seven Stars Battle Festival, and the person who would first cross blades with the Worst One in the upcoming one: Yuudai Moroboshi, the Seven Stars King and a third-year student at Bukyoku Academy.



A shrewd, coercive glare like that of a carnivore. Nearly six feet tall—a height that rivaled Alice's—with a perfectly complementary muscular stature. A large, intimidating man befitting of the bandana he wore. That was Yuudai Moroboshi, the greatest of Japan's student knights, whose voice alone froze every last bit of bloodlust that had permeated the air. And he wasn't the only one approaching Ikki and the others; two other students followed behind him, all three clad not in formal attire, but in Bukyoku's unique school uniform.

Ikki knew them as if they were celebrities. The boy, whose uniform, glasses, and posture were all perfectly tidy down to every last detail, was Byakuya Jougasaki. Next to him stood Momiji Asagi, a girl with a bandage on one cheek and eyes as mischievous as a little boy's. Both of them were third-year students at Bukyoku, and had respectively taken the second- and third-place rankings at the prior year's Festival. Indeed, the three who stood between Ikki and Tatara were those who'd stood on the podium the year before.



No wonder I feel so stiff.

The three of them were all clearly anything but ordinary. Just them being beside one another was intimidating enough to give the illusion that the reception hall had shrunk. None could ignore the immense presence emanating from them.

“You’re one loud girl, with all your talk about killing. I know you’re excited to fight in the Festival, but why don’t you calm down a little?”

They had obviously been watching the scene unfold for some time. Moroboshi didn’t seem to blame Ikki in particular, instead looking down at Tatara as he chastised her.

“Seriously. It’s impossible not to doubt someone’s character when they bring out their Device in a place like this. Then again, with a Device like that, I guess your character’s already in question.”

Following him, Jougasaki censured Tatara for her actions as well. Even so, she showed no signs of accepting that she was the one to blame.

“You stupid show-off kids don’t realize that character isn’t a weapon. Want me to show you what a real weapon feels like?”

Starting the engine of her chainsaw-like Device, Tatara pointed its spinning teeth at the boy standing at the front of the group, Moroboshi. But he merely maintained his cold glare.

“Don’t be so quick to show your teeth,” he sighed contemptuously. “You’re all bark and no bite.”

“Hrgh!” His reply was more than enough to get the already-violent Tatara seething, and she let out a strained laugh. “Geheheh, damn brat. Fine, then. We’ll see just who the weak one is right now.”

She stepped closer to Moroboshi as she spoke. Malice no longer dripped from her words, as it had transformed into clear murderous intent.

“Kh?!”

Suddenly, as if electrocuted, she came to a stop ten feet away from him. He let out yet another huffing sigh as he watched her.

“Pressing your luck just for show, I see. But that’s as close as you’ll ever get. Step into my force field and *bang!* It’s lights-out.”

Ikki looked to find that, at some point, a slender yellow spear had appeared in Moroboshi’s hand. That spear, its handle adorned with tiger fur, was the Seven Stars King’s Device, Tiger King.

“When’d you pull that out?!” Tatara shouted in surprise, stepping backward. She wasn’t the only one taken aback, either; Ikki was as well.

Incredible. She can’t even get close to him. Even his trained eyes had failed to notice Moroboshi materializing his Device, but what

amazed him most of all was that despite him not holding it offensively, he was still impossible to confront. No matter how one approached, it was terrifyingly evident that they would be met with a counterattack. *The Seven Stars King's legendary Predator's Sense... and I'm seeing it in real life!*

He had absolute control over the space around him, blocking even Raikiri's entry. No matter where or how one attacked, it was as if Moroboshi could discern and respond to it right away. His complete lack of openings was something he was extolled for.

Even Tatara was forced to hesitate before jumping in. That was natural, though, for the space around Moroboshi was the space around Japan's strongest student knight.

"Gahahaha! Man, this year's freshmen are really assertive, huh? Good stuff."

Bukyoku's students weren't the only ones who had made their way over to check out the commotion. A shadow covered Ikki and the others, speaking with a voice loud enough to give the impression that its owner was using a loudspeaker. Both belonged to a man well over six feet tall and almost three feet in breadth, with a bearded face that was unusual for a student. The giant who had joined them was a third-year student from Hokkaido's Rokuzon Academy and a quarterfinalist from the previous year's Festival: Renji Kaga, the Panzer Grizzly.

"But we can't waste food," Kaga admonished. "Farmers like me worked their hardest to raise these chickens so that they could one day be eaten and enjoyed. It's not rewarding if that doesn't happen."

When he was in elementary school, Kaga had supposedly singlehandedly reclaimed nearly two hundred fifty acres of land—enough to house twenty Tokyo Domes. Using his humongous hand, the legendary boy lifted the chicken leg with the poisoned razor hidden inside.

"Wait. That chicken...!"

Before Ikki could stop him, he had thrown it into his mouth, bone and all. His massive jaws clamped down on the food, tearing through chicken, bone, and razor blade alike. Every bit of it was shattered between his teeth before being swallowed with ease.

"Gahaha! You Akatsuki can kill an elephant, but you can't kill me!"

"I-Is this guy even human?"

Ingesting deadly poison yet not showing a single sign of illness, Kaga actually prompted Tatara to go pale. However, her shock would not end here.

"Fwoo♡"

"Hngh?!"

Suddenly, she felt something blowing on the back of her ear.

Massaged by that breath, she finally realized that she was being held by another girl.

“Aww, that’s a good girl. Stay still, now; I’m examining you.”



“Gaah?!”

Tatara quickly, forcefully shook herself free from the girl who’d attempted to grope her. She had escaped the threat, but horror still colored her face. As an established assassin within Rebellion, she was fully aware that her strength was real, but she had let her guard down and been seized by an assailant. It came as no surprise that she was panicked.

“Wh-What the hell do you want?!”

“Teehee♡ Well, well, aren’t you a lively patient? We should be glad that you are.” While Tatara’s voice quivered with anxiety, the lab coat-wearing woman’s plump lips grinned. “Buuut, based on your blood pressure and body temperature, you seem tense. Your small build and rough skin mean you’ve got a bad diet, too. Give me your hands.”

The moment she said that, Tatara’s hands disobeyed her will, dropping her chainsaw.

“Wh-What have you been d-d-do—?!”

Just as she’d been commanded, she formed a bowl shape with her hands and reached them out to the lab-coated woman, who looked at Tatara’s hands.

“Take your calcium, vitamin C, and your collagen. Along with that, here’s a special incense I prepared just for you. Light it before you go to bed and it’ll soothe your pride just like that.”

With a smile, she placed various pills, capsules, and finally a small parcel packaged with a cute ribbon into Tatara’s hand-bowl. Of course, Tatara neither wanted nor needed any of them. She tried to throw them all onto the floor, but...

I-I can’t move!

“The hell did you do to me?!”

“Hmm? Teehee♡ What’s got you so surprised? It’s a doctor’s job to do to her patient whatever is necessary, so of course I have the tools for that.”

Tatara sweat profusely as she screamed with rage, yet the woman still remained pleasant.

“Shizuku, do you know her?” Ikki asked, unable to take his eyes off the bizarre exchange.

“Yes, of course I do,” she replied with a slight nod. Though not the type of person to research strong knights—the party they were at was full of people she knew nothing about—the woman in the lab coat was different. She was a student, but she was also the best doctor in all of Japan, as well as a knight as strong as any other in the room. A peerless water mage, the woman had all but forced Shizuku to accept her strength. “Third-year student at Rentei Academy: the Medico Knight, Kiriko Yakushi. She didn’t attend the Seven Stars in her first or

second year, so I assumed she wouldn't this year, either."

"More importantly, did you notice when she grabbed Tatara? Could the ability she used be...?"

"You guessed right, Big Brother. It's much the same as my Aoiro Rinne, though I'm not yet able to vaporize my clothes like she can."

She'd figured out that much, but she was unable to determine what Kiriko was doing to rob Tatara of her freedom of movement. Perhaps she was using some sort of blood manipulation technique? Despite her supposition, however, it was an ability that was still beyond her capabilities.

It's unfortunate that I'm stuck in block D with her.

Like Shizuku, Kiriko was a water mage, and a very skilled one at that. The difference in ability between the two of them would be reflected in the results of their match. Shizuku could only hope that she would be defeated before the third round, where they would otherwise be pitted against each other.

Suddenly, from among all the national-level knights brought over by the commotion, Ikki picked out a familiar face.

"Hey, bitch. Who gave you permission to touch Worst One? Out with it!"

A blond-haired boy emerged from the crowd, violently grabbing Tatara by the collar. It was Donrou Academy's ace, a boy who had crossed blades with Ikki when he was helping Ayase Ayatsuji with her troubles. When they'd fought, he'd used his Marginal Counter, an ability that relied on his natural reflexes rather than his magical power, to put Ikki through the wringer. He was none other than Kuraudo Kurashiki, the Sword Eater.

"Kurashiki. It's been a while."

"Heh, I knew you'd make it this far. I'll be paying you back for what you did to me back then." Kuraudo returned his attention to the girl hanging from his fist. "It's not just me, either. Everyone here's been waiting to see what this guy can do. Mess with him and you're gonna get your shit kicked in."

His voice seethed with intimidation. Affirming his words, the foremost warriors in the country stared holes through Tatara. Even she, with her violent nature, couldn't handle the pressure. Several of those present had made it to or beyond the prior year's Seven Stars quarterfinals; attacking them in the situation she was in would have been far too disadvantageous.

"Tch! Lemme go!"

Though she had no control of her hands, Tatara kicked at Kuraudo until she was freed. Then, her lips distorted in anger, she left the scene, for that was the only option she had.



After Tatara left the reception room, Ikki expressed his gratitude to those who had gathered.

“Thank you, everyone. I was just about to take her bait.”

While he bowed in humility, Moroboshi’s threatening frown turned into an affable smile.

“No worries, man. Anyone would be seeing red if someone went after their sister. In fact, you did a good job not smacking the hell outta her right then and there. If it were me, I’d have bashed her skull in before she coulda even summoned that toothpick of hers,” he laughed, as if telling Ikki he had nothing to worry about.

“That’s nothing to be proud of, Yuu,” Jougasaki, standing next to him, sighed in annoyance. “The Seven Stars King has to be a good role model for every knight to follow. Why don’t you try being more level-headed?”

“Ahaha! You love your sister a little *too* much, Boshi,” Asagi commented.

“Say what now?! What do you expect from a big brother?! And counting the attack on Hagun, this is the second time that girl’s done something like this. Not even God gives third chances, so why should regular people like us bother giving second ones? You get me, right, Kurogane?”

“Haha... Sure, I get you. Akatsuki has really given us more than their fair share of trouble.” Ikki nodded in agreement. “Still, though, I can’t say I completely hate them.”

“Hm? What’s that mean?”

“It’s true that these aren’t exactly favorable circumstances, and I definitely can’t say that I like them. But because they’re participating in the Festival, we’ll be able to fight people from a world we’d normally never get to even see. I’m grateful for that part of it, at least.”

By dragging out people from the underworld, the upcoming Festival was going to be unlike any other. And that was just what Ikki wanted, for it gave the competition not just more ferocity, but more purity as well. After all, it was a competition to measure the strength of *all* young knights. From that perspective—and only that perspective—Ikki appreciated Akatsuki’s involvement.

“...Heheh. Hahahaha!” Moroboshi’s roaring laughter filled the venue. “Talk about a coincidence! You look like you’d never hurt a fly, but we’re in complete agreement. I thought I was the only one here with that hot-blooded spirit.”

The Festival, just two days away, would be truly worthwhile, as Moroboshi had always wanted a deathmatch with the Gale Sword

Emperor. The sheer act of dragging Ouma to the Festival was reason enough to thank the Akatsuki. However, a student from Hagun, someone directly harmed by their actions, wouldn't normally take part in such a conversation.

This must mean he understands the truth, he reasoned.

"People from a world we'd normally never get to even see', you say? So the rumor is true; Akatsuki Academy's students truly are outlaw mercenaries."

"That little brat from before wasn't normal, either. She just did whatever she wanted."

"None of that matters." Though Jougasaki and Asagi were uncomfortable with the information they'd just confirmed, Moroboshi curtly rejected their fears. "No matter who they are, it doesn't change what we have to do. Right, Kurogane?"

"Right," Ikki answered with a subtle nod and gentle smile. "We knights shouldn't expect fairness or equity from our enemies."

That was just the answer Moroboshi was hoping for. As he'd expected, Ikki understood the true nature of their existences as student knights. They were not mere athletes; they would one day shoulder the burden of protecting their country. To cry about unfairness would very much be to displace blame. Until a knight understood that truth, they would be nothing but an athlete regardless of how much power they had at their fingertips—they would never defeat a *true* knight.

"Rivalries and battles are both inherently unequal," Ikki continued. "That's not any different even for us student knights. No matter who our enemy is or how they got here, the responsibility of commenting on what is or isn't fair falls on the people managing this tournament. Our only job is to defeat that enemy."

That belief was the reason that, though he lamented her actions, he had never disparaged Ayase Ayatsuji as a coward or attempted to get her disqualified from their selection battle. He despised unfairness and inequity just as much as anyone else, but he did not reject them. Knights were warriors, not athletes; they could not expect fairness from their enemy.

Their short conversation was enough for Moroboshi to ascertain just how insightful and broad-minded Ikki was. With that new knowledge, Yuudai Moroboshi, the Seven Stars King, accepted that as an opponent, Ikki would not be lacking.

"Heheh... When I heard that a flunk beat Raikiri, I was pretty disappointed. I was so excited to finally, perfectly break through her undefeated Noble Art. But hey, it's not all bad; a new, interesting foe has taken her place, after all. Can't wait to meet you in the ring the day after tomorrow."

"When we do, I'll fight you with all I've got."

As Moroboshi's fighting spirit overflowed, Ikki returned his own challenging gaze. Much like how Moroboshi was gauging his opponent's broad-mindedness during their encounter, Ikki, too, was sizing up the Seven Stars King. In doing so, the two arrived at the same conclusion: the first round of the Festival would bring them face-to-face with death. A clear sense of foreboding was accompanied by unease, but also by anticipation that far outstripped it. Sharing those feelings, the two giants continued to stare each other down, dauntless.

"Oh, so, hey." Suddenly, Moroboshi's tone changed, losing all signs of tension as he pointed at Ikki. "I think you oughta go change your clothes now. I can see your tits."

"Wuh?!"

Ikki finally remembered the state his suit had been put in, and how he'd been baring his chest for all the world to see.

"Unless you're one of those guys who goes around showing off his pecs?"

"A-Absolutely not!"

Set off by the teasing, Ikki refuted and covered his chest. People among the crowd giggled at his overt reaction. By that point, the threatening mood created by Tatara had evaporated, allowing the bustling fun of the party to continue.



In the smoking room next to the reception hall, a man in a dark-red suit looked through the window upon the uproar caused by Tatara and her compatriots.

"I see you have many undisciplined students, Mr. Tsukikage."

The man, with graying hair and narrowed eyes behind tinted glasses, was the prime minister of Japan and the one responsible for the creation of National Akatsuki Academy: Bakuga Tsukikage. He turned toward the voice that spoke his name, exclaiming with glee once he had confirmed who it was.

"Oh, if it isn't Takizawa! It's been so long."

When Kurono Shinguuji heard the name "Takizawa", she shuddered ever so slightly. The tone of his voice as he spoke her maiden name was much the same as that of the Tsukikage from her days as a student—much the same as it had been when she'd admired him. To calm her nerves, Kurono lit a cigarette and took a puff of it. After that, she corrected him.

"It's Shinguuji now, sir."

"Ah, yes. How long has it been since the wedding? Have you been doing well all this time?"

"I have, thank you. I had a safe childbirth."

"Good, good. Yes, that's wonderful to hear."

Tsukikage seemed truly happy as he smiled, the wrinkles lining his face deeper than Kuro no remembered. He was honestly overjoyed that she was in good health. Kuro no had no doubt about that, judging by his expression, but that only further soured her expression.

He really hasn't changed. Neither his kind face nor his warm smile; everything was just as it had been long ago—just as it had been when she'd admired him. It filled her with puzzlement and irritation. *But then why did he do something like this?*

If only he had changed, even just a little bit. If only he had looked upon her with clear hatred or malice. Then, at least, maybe she wouldn't have had to be tormented by that question. But Kuro no suppressed her emotions as best she could and directed her own hateful glare toward her former teacher.

"I'm deeply loath to have to meet you again under these circumstances."

She was no longer his student; she was the director of Hagun Academy. For having hurt her students, the director of Akatsuki Academy was an enemy, a foe who could never be forgiven. That fact was immovable, so there was no need to carry on with their farcical small talk. The only need was to press him until he revealed why he had chosen such an awful course of action.

Kuro no understood her role well. She made that role perfectly clear, whereas Tsukikage, whose position in everything was entirely unknown, would not. In response, Tsukikage spoke with acceptance of her hatred.

"Haha. It's only natural that you're mad, what with me having used your academy as a stepping stone."

In other words, he accepted that what he had done had harmed her. His words also served as a confession that he had performed those actions with full knowledge of that fact. Having dragged that much out of him, she pressed yet further.

"Why did you do this?"



“The same as I said at the press conference: Blazers are the forefront of national defense, yet Japan entrusts the majority of their education to foreign powers. Even the issuing of Mage-Knight licenses is wholly under their control. We can’t issue those licenses, let alone revoke them freely. Could one call this a healthy situation? I would say not. For the sake of those who will inherit this country, I’m working to correct that mistake.”

Despite Kurono’s blunt questioning, Tsukikage offered no new information. He merely repeated the things he’d said back during his press conference.

“I really don’t think that’s the whole story. You’re hiding something.”

“Who, me? No. Shinguuji, just as you embraced Bukyoku’s way of doing things and made radical changes to Hagun, I assumed you would understand *my* radical changes to Japan.”

“Sorry to say this, but your actions are far beyond my own comprehension. Yes, Bukyoku Academy has had great results since Director Makunouchi’s takeover and their shift to rules and methods that stray from the Federation’s. It’s also true that the Federation’s main branch has had its eyes on them because of that. However, their actions were within the realm of common sense; yours are far from it. Especially when it comes to hiring terrorists to meet your goal.”

“Terrorists”? As someone in my position, I must tell you that I’m afraid I have no idea what you’re saying.” Kurono’s sharp refusal was met with a worried smile and feigned ignorance. Direct questioning was clearly futile. Just as Kurono began to accept defeat, Tsukikage spoke with a voice cold enough to send shivers down her spine. “But what’s wrong with lawlessness if it means destroying mistaken laws?”

“Kh!”

That was all she’d needed to hear. She hadn’t gone to see him thoughtlessly; she had made plenty of predictions and taken numerous things into consideration. Countless possible reasons for Tsukikage’s actions had swirled around in her brain before their meeting.

“Sir... I thought that might be the case.”

Kurono’s meticulous hypothesizing had allowed her to understand what Tsukikage was saying, along with the true goal implied by his decision to use lawless methods. That goal, however, was the worst development that she could have possibly envisioned.

“And what is ‘that’?”

“I’ve always thought it was strange. Establishing a national academy, choosing terrorists as your students, going to the Seven Stars, being so steadfast regarding the positioning of this national academy. All of this seems far too roundabout for the mere goal of taking back our right to educate Blazers.”

At its core, taking back Blazer education would have been a simple task given Japan's comfortable position within the Federation. Boasting both the third-largest economy in the world and an acceptance for religions with differing belief systems, the country acted as a glue that bound together lands that worshipped different deities. If the country earnestly set about negotiations, getting what they desired wouldn't have been difficult to accomplish. The Federation would face a much greater loss in Japan's departure than they would in any demands they refused.

"Taking back our right to educate Blazers falls under the category of things that we can achieve diplomatically. It's unprecedented for the head of a nation to associate with terrorists and declare war on his own citizens for the sake of rebelling against something so basic. You've gone too far for that. It's always bothered me, but this conversation has made it all but certain that the causality is actually the reverse. You didn't choose lawless methods for the purpose of taking back the right to educate Blazers, you used taking back that right as an excuse to justify the use of lawless methods."

"What makes you think that? Surely you must have a reason."

"I can't claim to know your personal motives, nor do I have the information required to theorize about them. But now that we've come this far, I can only think of one reason for your actions: you didn't *want* to open up negotiations with the Federation. Had they compromised and you accomplished your goal of getting Blazer education back, Japan would have ended up still being stuck as part of their organization. If that happened, your true motive of irreparably destroying relations between Japan and the Federation would be impossible to achieve!"

Kurono was certain that that was Tsukikage's true goal. The fact that the Rebellion was a key part of Akatsuki Academy had been communicated to the Federation's main branch by Kurono herself. As a result, any negotiations or compromise between the two was unlikely, as that would mean the Federation was submitting to terrorists.

Tsukikage had known—or perhaps merely hoped—that his heavy-handed methods would lead to that exact situation. Everything he had done was for the sake of his true goal, a decisive end to Japan-Federation relations.

"Heheheh. Well done, Takizawa. You've always been a bright one." Shockingly, Tsukikage made no attempt to deny Kurono's confident accusation. He spoke with a malicious grin uncharacteristic of himself. "Trying to hide the truth from you when you hit the bullseye that precisely would only serve to embarrass me, so yes, I can tell you that you're correct for the most part. As you said, my final

goal is to permanently sever any remaining ties between ourselves and the Federation.”

“Why would you do that?! Have you, of all people, sold yourself out to some other nation?!”

“Of course not. I’ve not sold out to anyone; I do this all for the good of Japan. You see, Japan shouldn’t be part of a gathering of weaklings such as the Federation. We have the power to maintain sovereignty, and to not make use of it would serve only to have us cleaning up the messes of other nations, by no means benefiting our own.”

“Tch!”

Kurono grew visibly angrier because of Tsukikage’s words.

To an extent, he was correct. The International Mage-Knight Federation was essentially an alliance between nations. Those under its banner would send personnel and resources to any members attacked by a non-member, making for a fast and efficient support pipeline. Much like with healthcare, a member not afflicted by the ailment known as war would be unable to receive any benefit, instead working solely for the benefit of others.

Vietnam, Iraq, Israel—in the past half-century, Japan had been made to send support to other nations despite having never gone to war itself, which was no light burden to bear. There was a deeply rooted belief amongst the general public that Japan was getting the short end of the stick in that regard. The Anti-Federation party, led by Tsukikage and the current ruling party, had gained incredible traction over those fifty years, presumably thanks in large part to that historical background. As such, Tsukikage’s claim was not a new concept to Kurono. But that didn’t mean she would ever agree with it.

“Are you sure you’ve thought this through?! This is an island country—it’s severely lacking in both land and resources! Do you really think we can keep our independence when we’re sandwiched between the likes of China, Russia, and America?!”

If nothing else, it was true that remaining in the Federation would continue to put Japan under a heavy burden, and the “short end of the stick” analysis did seem to have some merit. However, it was also true that the country was being protected under the Federation’s umbrella, and Kurono couldn’t even begin to imagine what would happen to a country left out in the rain. That was why she deeply feared Tsukikage’s plan—it threatened to transform Japan and the world at large in unthinkable ways. Unlike her with her worries, however, Tsukikage’s confidence was unshaken.

“We absolutely can. I swear to take back our rightful glory and territory.”

“And you’ll stop at nothing, I assume?”

“That’s correct. One hundred percent. That is the reason for Akatsuki Academy’s existence. They will dominate this tournament, and the masses will no longer desire the control of the Federation. My plan can no longer be stopped.”

“Rgh...”

“Heheh. Your expression tells me that you still don’t understand. But that’s fine; I don’t need your understanding. Freedom of thought is important, after all. You’re quite free to criticize, and you’re free to despair as well. However, I am the leader of this country. I will choose our path, and no one will interfere.” Tsukikage’s tone as he ground his cigarette into a nearby ashtray clearly displayed his rock-hard willpower. Then, as he walked toward the smoking room’s exit, he spoke to Kurono as if scolding a misbehaving child. “This is beyond the scope of a mere educator like yourself. Know your place and learn to not be so meddlesome.”

It was then that Kurono understood that Tsukikage had chosen a different path. He had no intention of ever stopping, made evident by his heavy footsteps as they moved further away. She had no power to stop him, either.

“Maybe it is too much for someone in my position to combat, but that’s only if Akatsuki Academy wins the tournament. I’ll shatter your ambition without even lifting a finger—my students will make sure of that.”

Without turning toward him as he made to exit the room, Kurono told him of her own heartfelt conviction. She was not loud, but her voice resounded with a powerful tone. Tsukikage froze for a mere moment with his hand on the door knob.

“I can’t wait... for your students to fall. It will only serve to make Akatsuki look even more superior.”

He left her with those words as he exited the room.

Finally, Kurono Shinguuji understood Tsukikage’s true goal. That didn’t mean she would tell Ikki and the others a word of what she’d learned, however. She would wait until after the tournament and force them to unknowingly bear the future of their nation, for what she was doing was nothing more than behind-the-scenes gambling on the outcomes of their matches.

They shouldn’t know about the disgusting off-field speculation going on here.

The students had to fight purely for themselves. If they did, they were sure to win. She was sure of that because she had once competed with the Demon Princess for the very summit they were hoping to reach. No matter how strong the students of Akatsuki were, they were lacking something vital: passion for the stage known as the Seven Stars Battle Festival. Without that, winning was nigh impossible. It

may have been feasible at a different stage of battle, but at the Seven Stars Battle Festival, victory without passion was unimaginable.



The day after the party—the day before the start of the Seven Stars Battle Festival. Ikki, Shizuku, and Alice were heading to the lobby of the hotel they were staying at, as they had decided to go out for dinner the final night before the event. Their decision was prompted by something from the previous day's party, an hour before Ikki had finally changed out of his damaged clothes. Just as the party was about to adjourn, Moroboshi had approached him and Shizuku.

"Heya, Kurogane. You know where you're eating tomorrow night?"

"Not really. I was thinking of just eating at the hotel's restaurant."

Upon hearing that Ikki hadn't thought much about it, Moroboshi frowned.

"Don't be like that. You're in Osaka, my man. You gotta try some of the food this place is famous for!"

"Fair enough. But what food is famous here?"

"Stuff made from flour, I'd say. Takoyaki is good, but that's more of a snack. If you want a real meal, go with okonomiyaki."

"But Big Brother, didn't we have okonomiyaki at the Langetsu back in Tokyo?"

"Stupid! That's the same as saying you know all there is to know about Nagasaki champon after one trip to Linger Hut. There are flavors you can't experience unless you go to the particular locality that's known for them. Okay, that's it; tomorrow, we're having okonomiyaki for dinner! I'll take you to the best place for it, too."

"Oh, um..."

"Let's meet outside the lobby at five o'clock!"

It felt less like they had agreed to Moroboshi's plan and more like he'd thrust it upon them before they could get a word in edgewise.

"He sounds awfully pushy," Alice commented. "Is that just what people from Osaka are like?"

"I hope not."

"I do appreciate the offer, though. I've never eaten okonomiyaki, and now that we're all the way in Osaka, I was hoping to try it at least once."

"Really? You should've said so sooner."

"Now, how could I drag you two around when you've got

matches tomorrow?"

She had a point. Rather than having a league-style setup, the Seven Stars was a single-elimination tournament, and as such, every fight needed to be prepared for with the highest possible level of concentration. Just about all of the competitors were focusing on ensuring they were in top form for the first day, so it was more or less expected for them to decline any invitations to hang out.

"Who would have thought a contestant would be the one to invite us, though?" Alice pondered. "Quite the strong nerve he has, wouldn't you say? Or do you think maybe he's simply anxious about tomorrow?"

An invitation from someone expected to bring home a second straight victory—someone likely under more pressure than anyone else present—to the person he would be fighting the next day. It was certainly not something any of them had planned for.

"If it was anxiety, he wouldn't have invited us, right?" Ikki asked in response.

"I'm not the type to get nervous around people I don't know, so it doesn't bother me. But what about you, Big Brother? You're kind, so if you have trouble turning down any other offers, I'll be there to do it for you."

The concern in Shizuku's voice must have been because of what she'd seen him do in the past. On the first day of selection battles, Ikki's nerves had caused him to start his battle with The Hunter on the wrong foot. She would have preferred that her brother spend the day before the battle undisturbed and unruffled by anyone or anything, which was why she spoke about Moroboshi in such a prickly way.

"It's okay. I do feel like he was pretty aggressive, but if I didn't want to go, I would've told him." Ikki hadn't been pushed along with the current; he had agreed of his own volition. That was the truth. "Like Moroboshi said, we came here all the way from Tokyo. We might as well eat something good. And besides..."

"Besides what?"

"Sharing a table with the Seven Stars King sounds way more exciting than being alone in my room to focus."

Ikki was simply interested in eating together with Yuudai Moroboshi. There were plenty of ways to study his power and abilities, but chances to learn about the King himself were few and far between. Ikki wanted to know what thoughts and desires spurred him onward. The Worst One prioritized their meeting over spending time focusing on his own.

"Your nerve might just be stronger than his."

Alice's amazement was justified. Clearly, Ikki was so innocent that he was immune to the feeling of awkwardness that would

accompany going out to eat with the person he was to fight the next day.

“Hey, over here!”

As the three left the hotel lobby, Moroboshi shouted to them from in front of the fountain. They immediately rushed over to him.

“Sorry. Did you wait long?”

“Nope, you’re right on time. I just got impatient, so don’t worry about it.” He then turned to look at Alice, as if just realizing something. “Hm? Who’s the handsome fella you got there?”

Although she’d dropped out, Alice had initially earned a spot as one of Hagun’s Seven Stars representatives. If Moroboshi didn’t recognize her, it must have been because he didn’t remember her from the pictures that had circulated back around the time the rosters had been announced. They hadn’t met at the party either, so he was confused by the new face. Shizuku took a step forward and introduced her.

“This is Nagi Alisuin. She’s my friend and one of our classmates at Hagun.”

“I wasn’t told about a friend limit, so I decided to join in. Should I not have?”

“Nah, no worries. Food tastes better when there’s more friends around,” he responded with a beaming grin. “Well, you might know me, but I should introduce myself. Moroboshi, of Bukyoku Academy.”

He offered his name to Alice and held out his right hand for a handshake.

“How kind of you. The name’s Alisuin, but call me Alice.” She had no reason to refuse such a kind greeting, so she gave her own name and accepted his handshake. Then, she grinned just slightly, mischief in her eyes. “Heehee. An unrefined tone, but a gentleman at heart. I love men like you.”

“Huh?!” Under the weight of her gaze, Moroboshi’s shoulders trembled. Considering this was the first time they’d met, his shock was unsurprising. He looked completely bewildered. “Sorry, uh... Is this a joke or something?”

“No, I’m serious. I’m a maiden born into a man’s body.”

“O-Oh. Uh... Must be rough.”

“Haha, you really are the Seven Stars King. Your hands are so muscular and manly.”

“Bwahhh!”

As Alice’s slender fingers massaged the back of Moroboshi’s hand, he turned pale and leaped away.

“Ahaha, such an innocent reaction. You’re so cute.”

“Alice, stop teasing him.”

“Heehee, sorry. It’s okay, Moroboshi; I was just playing around.”

“Oh... A-Ahaha. I get it, just playing. I’ve never met someone like you, so it was a real shocker.”

“I don’t go near straight boys.”

“Guess you’re *not* playing...”

This is just like the day I met Alice. Seeing Moroboshi acting the way he had months before, Ikki felt pretty nostalgic for a moment. *I’m used to her by now, but our meeting was a real wake-up call.*

That said, Moroboshi showed greater capacity to adapt to the situation. He cleared his throat once.

“W-Well, that’s fine. No matter who you are, you still appreciate a good meal, yeah?” After pulling himself together, he turned to Ikki with a question. “By the way, I haven’t seen the Crimson Princess. Is she still coming?”

“Yeah. She’ll probably show up at the last minute.”

“Really? Darn shame,” Moroboshi sighed, genuinely disappointed.

Ikki understood how he felt. Both of them had gone to the party to see the faces of those they would fight in the coming days. The Rank A knight, the Crimson Princess, was surely someone that the Seven Stars King would have wanted to—

“She seems like she’d eat enough to break the bank. I was kinda excited to see it.”

“Huh? Did you say something, Moroboshi?”

“A-Aha,ahaha, nothing! Just talking to myself.”

“Okay...”

Ikki looked at the suspicious-acting Moroboshi with confusion. It had sounded like he’d whispered something.

“Well, it’s about time we got going. It’s not as busy as Tokyo, but there’s a ton of people in the shopping districts at this time of day. Keep up so you don’t lose me.”

To keep Ikki from thinking too much about what he’d said, he gave the signal for them to leave and began leading them to the restaurant.



From the closest station to the hotel, the group of four rode the train for a little over ten minutes. When they hopped off, they carried themselves to the shopping district under Moroboshi’s leadership. Along the way, they began to notice a pattern.

“Hey, it’s Moroboshi!”

“That dummy, he really is here! Hey, what’re you doing?! Don’t you have a fight tomorrow?!”

“You’re the dummies, you silly kids! Like you said, my fight’s

tomorrow, not today!”

“Boshi, you’d better win again this year!”

“I couldn’t get a seat, but we’re gonna put a TV here in the shopping district and cheer you on!”

“Hahaha! I got this, kids.”

“Hey, Yuu. I’m off to go play mahjong with Taku. Wanna join?”

“Can’t, sorry. I’m showing some friends from Tokyo around. Maybe next time!”

“Boshi! We’ve got fatty tuna to celebrate your big win!”

“For real?! You know I’m gonna take you up on that, my man!”

“But if you lose, you’re getting a whole tube of wasabi up your nose!”

Men and women, young and old—so many different types of people called out to him. Some supported and encouraged him, and some even teased him. They all had different ways of communicating it, but they all showed deep kindness.

“Moroboshi is very popular,” Shizuku said, astonished by the sight. “Not even Stella would cause this much of a clamor just by walking around town.”

“Well, Stella is popular, but she’s still just a transfer student. I doubt anyone is more popular than the Seven Stars King, especially not in the city he’s from.” As long as events like the Seven Stars Battle Festival were televised, student knights were bound to gather fans, including those from other schools. Naturally, that meant that the conqueror of the Festival, the Seven Stars King, would have an incredible amount. “Not to mention that a two-year streak as King is unprecedented. Hometown heroes always get plenty of buzz, and if he gets this second win, it’ll just add to his already great achievements.”

“Heehee. He really is a big deal, isn’t he? So much riding on his shoulders, but not a sign of discomfort.”

“Yeah, he’s incredible,” Ikki agreed wholeheartedly. “After all that happened to him, and with all the hopes people put on him, he still takes everything in stride.”

“Big Brother, what do you mean by ‘all that happened to him?’”

“Huh? Oh, right. You wouldn’t know.”

Ikki’s expression hardened in response to Shizuku’s question. What Ikki had blurted out was related to something deeply entrenched in Moroboshi’s past. Still, it was a very well-known event, so he saw no need to hide it.

Judging by how Alice had been silent after Shizuku asked, she must have known about it—it was just that famous. However, Shizuku normally showed little to no interest in other people, so it wasn’t unlikely that she would be unaware. Even if she’d heard of it, she wasn’t the type who would have bothered to remember.

Is it okay for me to tell her?

Ikki thought it would be rude to talk about it in front of Moroboshi; it might have been a bitter memory for him. Fortunately, he was busy responding to his fans' cheers, so Ikki whispered as quietly as he could, telling Shizuku the story of Yuudai Moroboshi.

"You see, Moroboshi was forced to retire back in elementary school."

It had happened when he was in sixth grade. His extraordinary strength apparent even back then, he was nicknamed the "Star of Naniwa" after the ward of Osaka he lived in. Unfortunately, however, he was involved in a tragic train accident and sustained major injuries just before his final Little League tournament match.

Blazers could easily protect themselves using magic, so normally, they were resistant to accidents like those. That resistance had its limits, though. Large-scale accidents like train derailments easily broke through any magical protection they had.

"His injuries were so bad that they didn't heal completely even after he was put in a Capsule. Doctors said he would never walk again. Of course, he couldn't fight in that shape, so the Star of Naniwa was forced to withdraw from both his final Little League battle and the world of fighting as a whole."

"I never would've thought. But now he's walking normally, and fighting, too, right?"

"Yep."

As Moroboshi walked ahead of them, he seemed perfectly steady on his feet. But why wouldn't he? He was a legend, the winner of last year's Seven Stars.

"In short, even though he was told he would never recover, he overcame his injuries and made a major comeback as an athlete." Yuudai Moroboshi wasn't a man who had been born with the silver spoon of glory in his hand. Far from it, in fact—he had once fallen to rock bottom. After four long years, he was once again able to flourish on the field of battle, finally taking the summit last year. His road was one that had been far from level. "It's just incredible. He did something no normal person could do."

"Recovering from injuries like that is certainly impressive."

"Well, it's not just that, Shizuku."

"What do you mean?"

Recovering from his injuries was indeed incredible, but that wasn't all there was to it.

"The most amazing thing of all is what you're seeing right now," Ikki said as he made a quick visual sweep of the smiling townspeople before them. "Nobody here is afraid of Moroboshi losing. Nobody asks

him about his bodily condition or worries about him in any way; they all have absolute faith in him.”

They had not the slightest doubt in the Star of Naniwa and his full recovery. Even after being told he had no hope of recovery, he’d built enough trust that everybody had stopped worrying.

“If you ask me, that’s more difficult, more incredible than just reaching the summit.”

Ikki had always wanted to ask Moroboshi what had led him to do all that, what the driving force within his heart that had spurred him into action was. The answer must have been closely related to Moroboshi’s strength. Amidst Ikki’s enthusiasm, Shizuku sighed deeply.

“Haah... And you’re up against him in your first match. You have some truly terrible luck, Big Brother. You must have committed a lot of crimes in a past life.”

“He used up all his luck on his lovely sister and beautiful girlfriend, obviously.”

“If that’s where all my luck went, that’s totally understandable. I don’t mind at all.” Just then, Ikki alone abruptly stopped walking. “Hm?”

He sensed that someone’s eyes were fixed on the back of his head, coming from among the foot traffic passing them. It was an intense glare that struck him, enough to make him stop and turn to look for it. By then, though, the eyes had turned elsewhere, signs of their presence washed away by the flow of people.

“Big Brother? What’s wrong?”

“It’s nothing,” he replied before speeding up to rejoin the others.

It couldn’t have just been his imagination, but he also couldn’t pursue the source of the gaze, and that bothered him to no end. As he wondered, the party exited the shopping district and reached their destination.

“Here we are, ladies and gentleman! This is Osaka’s best—maybe even Japan’s best—ekonomiyaki joint: First Star!”



The restaurant that Moroboshi had guided them to was at the very far end of the shopping district. It was a two-story, traditional Japanese building; its entrance was adorned with red curtains bearing the words “First Star”, and its wooden walls, darkened with age, seemed to exude a sort of dignity. The restaurant had probably been standing since long before Ikki or even his parents were born.

“It certainly has a lot of character.”

“Hah! It’s okay, you can say it’s shabby. The thing’s been standing for almost a hundred years, y’know. I hear it was a sukiyaki

joint back then, though.”

“I love old Japanese buildings like this. The nostalgia of it is just so lovely.”

“Aren’t you a foreigner, Alice?”

“I-I’ve probably got some Japanese blood in me somewhere! Probably! Say, what’s that?”

Alice fixed her eyes on one part of the building.

“What is it, Alice?” Interested in what had caught her eye like that, Ikki followed her line of sight. There, next to the entrance, were a rusty mailbox and nameplate with “Moroboshi” written on it.

“Moroboshi”? Is this your home?”

Ikki’s question prompted Moroboshi to make an exaggerated “you got me” face.

“Aww, secret’s out. I wanted to surprise you guys when we got inside. But yeah, just like you sleuthed, this is my place.”

“So you were just advertising to us, eh? My, how shrewd of you.”

“Hahaha. Yeah, I guess. Call me the Businessman of Naniwa.”

Moroboshi laughed absentmindedly at Alice, whose eyes were wide with surprise. He was the very picture of an enthusiastic salesman.

“You don’t have to worry, though, ’cause my family’s okonomiyaki really is the best. People come here from all over the place, and we’re not letting ’em eat garbage. You love eating good food, and we love money. *Bam*, we’re both happy. Ain’t it beautiful?”

“That all sounded very suspicious and very overly convenient for him. Are you sure he’s trustworthy? Perhaps we should search for somewhere else to eat instead?” Shizuku asked Ikki, seemingly—understandably—unconvinced.

“We don’t have anywhere else to go. Let’s give it a try.”

“If you’re okay with it, then I don’t mind.”

“Then let’s hop to it and get in there,” Alice said, joining their conversation. “It smells so good out here that my stomach is growling.”

“Sounds like we’re all in agreement!” Moroboshi cheered. With everyone on the same page, he led them through the curtains. After struggling a bit to open the sliding door, they entered the restaurant.

“Ooh.”

“Wow...”

The delicious scent of sauce tickled their noses. The fragrance was several times stronger than the smell from outside, stimulating even greater hunger. Even Shizuku, who normally didn’t fixate heavily on food, couldn’t help but show her desire.

“It smells so delicious.”

“For sure. Business seems to be booming, too.”

Like Alice indicated, the inside of the store was bustling despite

it being a little too early for dinner. Almost every table was filled, and the voices of customers placing orders could be heard within all the noise. Whether it was the best in Osaka or not, a place this busy couldn't possibly have made bad food.

"Heeey, Mama!"

While Ikki and the gang had their hearts stolen by the fresh scents of the restaurant, Moroboshi's voice pierced through the whirlpool of noise with ease. In response, a middle-aged woman looked up from her work of flipping okonomiyaki. Her sharp eyes, similar to Moroboshi's, went wide as she did.

"Oh? What are you doing here, dear? Weren't you staying at that hotel until the tournament is over?"

"I came to see your beautiful face, Mama."

"Stop that, you little creep! You're giving me goosebumps."

"Rude! No point in being a good son to you, I guess."

"I've been working my whole life! I don't need the kid I popped out from between my legs trying to help me!"

"People are eating, Mama! Don't gross 'em out with your foul mouth!"

"No other way to talk to little brats like you. Right, everyone?" Customers around the restaurant laughed. The atmosphere was unpretentious, very characteristic of downtown Osaka. "So, really. Why'd you come home?"

"I brought some people from Tokyo that I met at the hotel. Since they're here in Osaka, I wanted them to try Osaka's best okonomiyaki."

Moroboshi jabbed his thumb in the direction of Ikki and the others behind him.

"Oh, I see." That exchange gave Moroboshi's mother all the information she needed. She interrupted her work and put a genial smile on her sweaty face. "Welcome. I'm Yuudai's mama. Rest your legs here."

"All right. Thank you."

"I dunno if we're the best in Osaka, but you can be sure I'll put all I can into your food."

"That sounds great. I'm looking forward to it."

"It seems really busy, though. Are there any open seats?"

"We've got one table open now, actually. Let's get you sat there. Koume, take our customers to their table, please."

In response to Moroboshi's mother's order, a girl in a kimono and an apron trotted over toward Ikki's group. Middle school-aged with a bob cut, she was too young to be an employee.

"Well, aren't you cute. Is she your sister?"

"Yep, that's Koume. She's not a Blazer, though."

Moroboshi confirmed Alice's hypothesis. Unlike their mother, she looked very different from him. She must have taken after her father, instead.

"Koume, take them to the table at the end."

Ready to follow her mother's order, Moroboshi's sister nodded and stepped in front of Ikki's group.

"...!"

The moment she and Ikki locked eyes, however, hers flew open, and she silently made an expression of shock and bewilderment.

Huh?

Ikki tilted his head, wondering what was so weird about himself. Fortunately, Moroboshi was there to give him his answer.

"She's just surprised that tomorrow's opponent is here."

"Oh, okay."

Her surprise only lasted a moment before she collected herself and put on a practiced smile. It was obvious that she was the daughter of a businessperson. Following a perfectly neat bow, she retrieved a sketchbook from within the large sleeves of her kimono.



“Welcome!”

With a warm smile, she flipped through the book and showed Ikki’s group the cutely styled letters that made up the charming greeting written within.

“Uh...?”

Ikki and his two friends behind him raised their eyebrows in confusion. After all, what kind of employee greeted customers through writing instead of just speaking? As if expecting them to react that way, Moroboshi quickly stepped in to explain.

“Don’t worry about it. She’s just a little mute.”

“Ah. And that’s why she’s using the book?”

“Yep. But she’s not sick or anything; it’s just a mental thing.”

Moroboshi’s cheerful tone warded off Ikki’s worries. Then, Koume herself flipped to another page of her sketchbook, revealing some playful words.

“I’m still very ladylike, though.”

“Whatever you say, you little rascal.”

Moroboshi pressed his finger against her forehead, prompting a big smile. At first, Ikki had been unsure how to respond to learning that she was mute, but after seeing her and her brother’s fun little exchange, he couldn’t stop himself from smiling.

“You two get along well.”

“She’s my only little sister. Not to mention that she’s cute.”

Just then, Ikki felt something poking at his back. Turning around to find out what it was, he heard Shizuku say something strange.

“It’s me, your only little sister.”

What exactly are you telling me to do?

Not understanding the point, Ikki followed Moroboshi’s example and poked Shizuku’s forehead.

“Hnnngh!”

Shizuku seemed both uneasy and excited as she broke out into a wide grin. Was she trying to compete with the Moroboshi siblings? It was always hard to figure out what she was thinking.

“Man... I thought we were early, but the place is already packed,” Moroboshi muttered, looking around the restaurant. In response, Koume’s pen went into a flurry.

“They’re all here to watch the Seven Stars. I’ve seen a lot of new faces today!”

Upon seeing her brief summary of the day’s events, Moroboshi made a decision.

“That so? Hmm... Maybe I oughta help out. Sorry for just dragging you all here, but it’s busy, so I’m gonna go help my mama.”

“You’re not going to eat with us?”

“I wanted to, but look at all these people.”

Despite the relatively large size of the restaurant, there were almost no empty seats. Griddles all over were being utilized to the fullest, spewing white smoke. Anyone could tell it was a busy day.

“Okay. Don’t worry about us when your mom’s back there working so hard.”

Ikki felt bad that he wouldn’t be able to talk to Moroboshi, but given the circumstances, he would have felt even worse stopping him from helping. Moroboshi lowered his head slightly in apology.

“Sorry, especially after I invited you here. Let Koume know what you want. It’s all my treat, so get anything you like.”

“But weren’t you advertising?” Shizuku asked wide-eyed, but Moroboshi responded with a grin like that of a boy who had successfully pulled off a prank.

“That was a joke, duh. Don’t trust a Kansai guy if he’s smiling!”

Everything had apparently been a joke, as Moroboshi had meant to treat them all along. However, it would have been too awkward for him to let someone he’d just met yesterday do that. They were essentially strangers.

“I can’t let you do that. Here, I’ll pay.”

“It’s fine! The stuff’s not even expensive.”

“But—”

“I said it’s fine, man. I’m older than you, so you gotta listen to me.” Though Ikki had tried to sidestep the offer, he was overpowered. Moroboshi was a man that was pushy in many situations, it seemed. “So, Koume, I’ll leave them to you.”

Handing off Ikki’s group to his nodding little sister, Moroboshi tightened his bandana and headed to the cooking area. After seeing him off, Koume turned back to her customers and flipped through her sketchbook, in which she had clearly pre-written many of her commonly used sentences.

“I’ll take you to your seats!”

After showing them that message, she then guided the party of three to their table.

“Here’s your table♪”

“Thank you.”

After thanking her, Ikki’s group took their seats and ordered their food. Koume wrote the orders in her sketchbook and confirmed their accuracy before returning to the kitchen. Waiting for their orders gave the three of them time to relax, but that was when they overheard the conversation between the two people sitting at the table behind them.

“For real? You and Moroboshi *aren’t* a thing?”

“That’s what I keep saying. He’s not even close to my type, anyway.”

Both of the voices were women’s, one of which Ikki felt like he had heard just recently. Everyone at his table turned their eyes toward those voices. Likewise, the two women noticed his group’s presence and turned to look at them.

“Hm?”

“Ah—”

“Well, well.”

“Yakushi!”

Five gazes intersected one another. As Ikki had suspected, the woman whose voice he’d recognized was Kiriko Yakushi, the Medico Knight. With her was Yagokoro, the Bukyoku Academy newspaper club member who had been present at Hagun and Kyomon’s joint training camp.



An unexpected meeting in an unexpected place. Hotels or restaurants near the Festival arena would have been more or less expected, but in the heart of Osaka, where flour-dish restaurants were a dime a dozen, it was an incredible coincidence to meet another Seven Stars representative. At least, Ikki had thought that it was a coincidence.

“What?! You were the one who treated Moroboshi’s injuries?!”

“Yep. Fate’s weird, isn’t it?”

Once he began speaking to her, it became clear that she had come to see Moroboshi, not to eat okonomiyaki.

“I guess, but aren’t you both in the same school year? Was it okay to treat his injuries without a medical license?”

“He’s better now. Does it matter?”

I think the law would say it does, Ikki thought, but he felt like probing further would be needlessly poking the bear.

“So, Yakushi, you came to see your patient from a long time ago?”

Choosing *not* to probe, Ikki instead asked why Kiriko was present here today. Kiriko gave an ambiguous, half-yes-half-no hand wave in response.

“It’s not so much just coming to see him; it’s more like a house call.”

“Huh?” Those words sent uncomfortable reverberations through Ikki’s heart. “Is Moroboshi not fully healed?”

His heart was beating faster with the apprehension that Moroboshi was still hurt. However, Kiriko quickly denied his fear.

“No, he’s one hundred percent healed. But the treatment was

really extreme, so you could call this ‘individual aftercare’. I don’t want the worst happening to my patient, after all.”

“Oh, so this is just your way of being kind.”

“Sure.”

“That’s... good.”

Ikki gave a deep sigh of relief. He would have been immensely disappointed if his chance to fight the Seven Stars King were tarnished by past wounds.

“So I decided to do this anti-worst-case aftercare, but he wasn’t in his hotel room. I asked Jougasaki about it, and he said he’d gone home, so here I am. I took a taxi because I was in a hurry, but unfortunately, moving so quickly was a blunder. Paparazzi girl here started wrongly suspecting me of being a certain something to him.”

Kiriko shot a resentful glance at Yagokoro. Judging by context, it seemed that she had been accused of and questioned about an impure sexual relationship with Moroboshi.

“Haha... Well, that sounds awful.”

“Yeah, it was.”

“Oh, gimme a break! Why would a doctor be rushing to a long-recovered patient’s house like that? It’s the perfect picture of doctor-patient love. It reeks of intrigue like it’s surströmming! Who *wouldn’t* be suspicious?”

“I’m not kidding. That boy’s got the look of a wild animal in his eyes; he’s definitely not my type. I prefer younger boys like little Kurogane here, what with his handsome face.”

“Excuse me?!”

The sudden, bizarre comparison had Ikki yelping in surprise. But his innocent reaction spurred her on further.

“Teehee♡ Hey there. What do you say I give you a quick pre-battle physical later? I might even throw in a little bonus.”

Kiriko gave Ikki a lascivious look as she bent in such a way that her cleavage was clearly exposed from beneath her white coat. It was an intense assault. In terms of size, she was no match for Stella, but the voluptuous charm only found in older women was now being thrust at Ikki.

What kind of “bonus” comes with a physical?!

He had a feeling he would be diagnosed with high blood pressure. But in the midst of Ikki’s confoundment, Shizuku left Alice’s side.

“Pardon me.” Moving between the two to protect Ikki, she glared at Kiriko, who was still giving him a seductive look. “Stella is more than enough obscenity for him, I would think.”

“You could’ve worded that a little nicer.”

Ikki breathed a sigh of heartfelt relief that Stella wasn’t with

them. Beside him, Yagokoro abruptly asked Alice a question.

“Let me guess, Moroboshi brought all of you here?”

“My, you’ve got good intuition.”

“Thought as much.”

Given no good reason to hide the truth, Alice confirmed her suspicion outright. But what was with Yagokoro’s tone of voice?

“Does this happen often, perhaps?”

“Yeah. Well, maybe not *often*, but he does it whenever they have stuff like exhibition matches that bring strong kids from other schools. Guess it must be Moroboshi’s own little welcome to strong foes who come to Osaka. I’m here because I expected him to do it, actually. Never know when you might hear some juicy news. That said, I didn’t think he’d bring his opponent for tomorrow’s match. He’s one brazen guy.”

“That’s certainly not a normal thing to do.”

“You’re not much different, considering you accepted his invitation.”

“Haha. I’m well aware of my own brazenness.”

If he wasn’t a little brazen, the Rank F knight wouldn’t have been shooting for the title of Seven Stars King.

So, Moroboshi welcomes his opponents.

That sounded just like something he, a boy who was practically a full-fledged hero, would do. While Ikki was busy thinking about those sorts of things, Kiriko, still separated from him by Shizuku, whispered to him.

“Teehee. But Moroboshi isn’t as purely brazen as you all might think.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It means what I said. Yes, his invitation was partially meant as a welcome, but he has other motives as well.”

“Like what?”

Her disquieting tone caused her fellow Bukyoku student, Yagokoro, to furrow her brow.

“Don’t tell me Moroboshi’s treating him to some good food and hoping he’ll appreciate it so much that he doesn’t want to fight... No, I doubt he’s that crafty.”

“Haha. You’re right, he’s not. In fact, it’s the other way around.”

“The other way around?”

What would that be if it were the other way around? Ikki began pondering the true meaning of Kiriko’s claim, but his thoughts were quickly interrupted.

“Whoa, talk about a surprise! Looks like something big’s going on here,” Moroboshi said, shocked, as he carried over the meals they’d ordered.



Moroboshi marveled at the group, larger than when he'd left it, with five people's worth of food on two trays.

"Koume told me Doc was coming, but I didn't know *you* were here, Yagokoro."

"How rude. You don't look at a maiden's face and scream 'Whoa'."

"You paparazzi gotta learn to behave yourselves. You're annoying Doc and Kurogane's friends."

"I'm not annoying them at all."

"No?" Yagokoro's outright lie had Kiriko dumbfounded. For having called Moroboshi brazen, she had gone far past that—she was well into the realm of shamelessness.

"You're one to talk. What kind of guy drags his opponent to his house the day before their fight?"

"He agreed to come, so it's cool."

"I mean, you look like a bad guy. He probably didn't refuse because he was scared."

"Don't be silly," Moroboshi snickered at the insult. "Anyone who'd be afraid of my face wouldn't come to the Seven Stars at all. Ain't that right?"

"Well, I can at least confirm that you didn't make us come."

Moroboshi smirked triumphantly, as if saying, "see?", but his face quickly clouded over.

"Man, we've got one heck of a gang here. I wanted to sit with you guys, but I'm stuck working instead. Darn shame," Moroboshi muttered regretfully, setting the food on the two tables with expert precision. He laid Ikki's pork okonomiyaki in front of him. It was a substantial meal, the size of a small pizza. "Anyway, here you go. Three pork, two seafood deluxe."

"Wow, it smells great. And it's really true that steam makes the bonito flakes dance!"

Alice, who had been born in a foreign country, was very excited about seeing real okonomiyaki for the first time. The others, urged on by the steamy, bonito flake dance-inducing goodness, readied their chopsticks. Ikki was still somewhat curious about the motives Kiriko had mentioned, but it was no longer the time or place to continue that conversation.

I'm definitely not gonna just up and ask why he's doing this.

For the time being, his best option was to eat up. Changing gears mentally, Ikki took his own chopsticks and turned his attention to his food. That was when he realized that something was amiss. There was something that made Moroboshi's family's okonomiyaki different from

the okonomiyaki in Tokyo.

Oh, so that's it.

"The tables here don't have griddles."

"Nope. Those cost a fortune in gas, and stuff always ends up getting burned on one side. It might be more atmospheric to have 'em, but we aren't about that. We try to cook our food to absolute perfection, 'cause that's how we want it when it goes in your mouth."

The restaurant, priding itself on being Osaka's best, had thought everything through. In order to keep the staff's efforts from going to waste, Ikki decided to make sure he ate it while it was still nice and hot.

"Time to eat, then."

He tore off a piece of his pork okonomiyaki with his chopsticks and said his thanks before bringing it to his mouth. The moment the food touched his tongue, his eyes opened wide with shock and joy.

Ooh!

It was far different from anything he'd eaten in Tokyo. It was delicious—beyond delicious, even. The main flavor was, incredibly, not from the pork or the sauce, but the dough. The cabbage inside the dough, too, was incredibly fresh and sweet. The whole thing had a richness that lingered in the mouth.

"Man, this is so good! Don't you think, Shizuku?"

"Yes. It's unlike anything in Tokyo. The okonomiyaki there only tasted like the sauce, which made it salty, but this is sweet. It's like the saltiness from the sauce is accenting the dough's sweetness. But I think there's too much here for me to eat."

Both she and Alice had both fallen in love with the food, and she was much more talkative than usual as a result. Though a light eater, she was a gourmet. It was rare for her to praise food the way she was.

The other two women were also delightedly stuffing their cheeks. Moroboshi grinned with joy at the sight of them all.

"Hahaha! Whaddaya think? It's great, right? Looks like our secret ingredient is working like a charm. Figure it out yet, Kurogane?"

"A secret ingredient?"

Ikki focused his senses on his tongue and thought about it as he chewed. The most emphasized flavors were the cabbage's strong, fresh sweetness and the dough's gentle sweetness. That pairing, combined with and accentuated by the saltiness of the sauce, was what made the dish truly unique. But there was something more to it as well; a sweetness that remained on the tongue even after swallowing. It couldn't have come from the cabbage, whose sweetness was the refreshing kind that disappeared with every swallow, and it was too different from the flavor of the dough to have come from there.

The aftertaste must be coming from that secret ingredient.

Ikki carefully examined the full spectrum of flavors coming from the dish. After thinking for a moment, he came to the conclusion that the aftertaste was similar to that of cheesecake.

"Hmm... Could it be cheese?" he guessed, prompting Moroboshi to sigh in amazement.

"Wow, you've got some taste buds. You're spot-on, our okonomiyaki has cheese in it."

It was only a tiny amount. There was so little, in fact, that it wasn't even enough to let the taste of cheese come through on its own. Even so, Moroboshi claimed that it was more than enough to magnify the flavor of the dish.

"It really is like a secret ingredient."

"I was a little worried after all that talk of pulling customers in, but this is so satisfying. I'm glad I came."

Alice was absolutely right; the okonomiyaki Moroboshi had served them was incomparable to its Tokyo counterpart. Not a word of how good it was had been exaggerated. It made Ikki happy he'd come—though that emotion in itself prompted a question.

"Excuse me, Moroboshi. Are you sure it's okay for you to treat us to something *this* good?"

"It's fine, my man. Mama would kill me if I dragged you here just to shake cash out of you. For real, don't sweat it. Think of it as my way of greeting a rival that came all the way out to Osaka."

"But it feels wrong to take so much."

They didn't have much of a point of comparison to call First Star's okonomiyaki the best in Osaka, but they could hardly complain about the taste. Ikki was already grateful enough to Moroboshi for taking time out of his day on the eve of the Festival, of all days. With the addition of him having treated them to a meal, Ikki was starting to feel bad.

"Return the favor during tomorrow's match, then," Moroboshi replied, flashing his usual amicable smile.

"During tomorrow's match?"

Ikki parroted Moroboshi's words, to which he nodded.

"That's what I said. See, good food's a good motivator. I want you to use that motivation to build up your energy and get yourself in perfect condition for tomorrow's match. That'll be plenty enough to pay me back for treating you here, 'cause beating an opponent who's at their best is the only way I can prove my strength."

That was when Ikki noticed something that lay deeper within Moroboshi's eyes, behind the amicable smile. In them, fighting spirit bubbled and boiled, potent enough to almost be equivalent to killing

intent. And as he took note of this veiled will to fight, Ikki also came to understand something.

This must be what Yakushi meant by “the other way around”.

The other motive of Moroboshi’s that she’d mentioned was not to be kind in hopes of making his opponent less willing to fight, but the exact opposite. By giving his opponent the grandest welcome he could muster, he would fill them with vigor in an attempt to ensure they were in top form and would fight their absolute best the next day.

Picking up an easy victory because of his opponent’s carelessness or poor condition was out of the question for Moroboshi; what he wanted was an honorable duel that involved the utmost effort from both parties. Then and only then would the victory be meaningful and worthwhile. That was the Seven Star King Yuudai Moroboshi’s own brand of chivalry.

“We’re gonna have a serious match on the biggest stage we’ve ever been on. I don’t want either of us to have any regrets, so tomorrow, let’s both go wild and fight at our best. What do you say, Another One?”

“*Our*”. That one word meant that the Seven Stars King, the one who stood above all other student knights, recognized him as someone worth fighting with all his strength. It wouldn’t have been unusual for someone as strong as Moroboshi to brush aside a mere Rank F upstart like Ikki, but instead, the boy who stood at the very summit was eager to fight him in earnest. He was grateful for that, for he, too, understood the value of a victory earned through desperate struggle.

I’m glad I came here today, Ikki thought, his feelings deepened by the knowledge of Moroboshi’s true motive. For a knight—a warrior—there was no greater honor than to be acknowledged by a powerful foe as being a powerful foe themselves, and to be challenged to a battle at full strength. Therefore, he had not a single reason to refuse.

“If that’s how it is, I’ll gladly accept the meal. In return, tomorrow, I’ll be the greatest opponent you could have ever asked for.”

“That’s just what I was hoping you’d say.”





Ikki and the gang spent another hour at First Star before the five of them finally took their leave. Moroboshi had asked them to wait until he was free, but even after they'd finished their meals, the place seemed to get busier rather than slowing down. It didn't seem as though he was going to be free any time soon, and they didn't want to disrupt operations any further.

"Phew. It's been so long since I've gotten to eat until my stomach cried for mercy."

"Same here. I've actually got a stomachache."

"Jeez. Alice, Big Brother, you both ate too much. Don't be like Stella."

"Oh, sweetie. Stella wouldn't have stopped at two servings."

If Stella were here to hear this, they'd probably be rolling on the floor fighting by now. Ikki missed the clamor. Though it was only a short time ago that she'd left to train under the Demon Princess, the way they were always attached at the hip at school made their time apart incredibly lonely for him. *Actually, if she were here, the whole trip to Moroboshi's restaurant would've been a lot livelier. I should take her there once the Seven Stars is over.*

She would definitely be overjoyed about that, so Ikki, stirred by the wind of sorrow that visited his heart, resolved himself to do so. Then, he turned to look at Kiriko, who was walking next to him.

"By the way, Yakushi."

"Mm? Yeees?"

"Why'd you leave with us? Didn't Moroboshi need a physical?"

It was a question that had been on Ikki's mind for a while. Kiriko had eaten her food and left with them, not performing the checkup that she had initially gone there for. Ikki figured that maybe she had forgotten, but Kiriko didn't seem perturbed by the revelation.

"I already did it, though," she replied as if stating the obvious.

"You did? When?"

"Teehee♡ A water mage like me can recognize the flow of blood and lymph in a person's body, even through their clothes. If I wanted to, I could actually use it to read their mind, or even interfere with it and control them."

"No way! Is that how you kept Tatara from moving yesterday?"

"Correct. I usually use it to help with rehabilitation, but it's perfect for disciplining sillies like her, too. Besides..."

"Hm?"

"It just feels so nice to bend others to my will," she said, a wonderfully broad smile accompanying the wonderfully awful thing she'd revealed. Ikki prayed that he would never be placed in her care.

“So, how did he look?” he asked. Seeing as Moroboshi would be his opponent the next day, it only made sense that he was interested.

“He’s almost annoyingly healthy, which is a relief. Then again, what else would you expect from one of my patients?” she responded rather proudly.

“Would you say he’s in perfect condition, then?”

“Yep. You’ve got your work cut out for you in the first round.”

Kiriko spoke as if she felt sorry for him, but Ikki didn’t feel that way at all. The only reason he would have felt that way was if Moroboshi *weren’t* in perfect form, for there would have been no worth in repaying the favor they’d talked about back at the restaurant.

During their conversation, the group of five exited the shopping district and arrived at the station.

“Well, I’ll take my leave here. I’m not staying at your hotel, after all.”

“Want us to walk you back?” Alice thoughtfully offered to Yagokoro, who was going home alone, but she refused graciously.

“I’m fine; it’s not far. And y’know, I’m a student knight too.” She took a few steps away from the gang, but then turned back toward them as if she’d remembered something. “Oh, Worst One. There’s something I wanna ask you.”

“What is it?”

Yagokoro made a complex expression—not quite one of annoyance but not quite a smirk.

“I usually don’t care about dumb rumors, but this one’s just too crazy to *not* look into.”

For someone like Yagokoro to call a rumor “crazy”, it must have truly been disturbing. Feeling a strange sweat on his brow, Ikki fearfully urged her to speak.

“What’s the rumor?”

“Well, uh... They say you fought Twin Wings and won. Is it true?”

“Ah—” Ikki gasped in surprise at Yagokoro’s question.

Twin Wings. The world’s strongest sword fighter, Edelweiss. Ikki’s fight with her was carried out in an empty schoolyard. Nobody should have seen it, so the media should not have picked up on it. He had never expected anyone to ask him about their fight. Watching him, Yagokoro quickly became impatient.

“Ooh! Why are you reacting like that?! Is it actually true?! Did you seriously win?!”

“No, no, no! Calm down for a sec! I did cross swords with Edelweiss, yes, but—”

“F-For real?!”

“Come on, I said calm down!” As Yagokoro approached, ready to

sink her teeth into the story, Ikki put his hands on her shoulders and attempted to soothe her before correcting the rumor. “Yes, it’s true that we fought, but that’s the only part that’s true. I was nowhere near winning. During the fight, I blacked out... and when I woke up, I was in a hospital bed. She took pity on me and let me live. That’s all there is to it.”

He couldn’t let people believe that he’d beaten her. Seeming to have assumed the rumor was false from the start, Yagokoro was quickly convinced by his statement.

“O-Oh, okay. I thought that sounded weird, yeah. But the fact that you fought her and lived to tell the tale is big news in itself! H-Hey, sorry to do this when you’re on your way to the hotel, but could you give me the deets on the battle itself?”

Yagokoro’s face was quickly lit up by this big scoop she’d struck. Ikki, however, could only apologize.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t.”

“Wh-Why not?! I’m not gonna use the article to make fun of you for losing!”

“It’s not because of anything like that. I just don’t remember the fight all that well.”

“You don’t?”

“No. I remember being beaten to a pulp, but I was so preoccupied with defending myself that the last half is a bit of a blur.”

That was no lie. Ikki remembered his full-body Dokuga no Tachi being repelled with ease and Intetsu being shattered, but his memories after that—of how he’d maneuvered around Twin Wings and of the moment he’d taken his final swing at the world’s strongest sword fighter—were lost. He’d heard a little bit about it from Kurono, his rescuer, but his inability to remember made it feel as though she were talking about someone completely unrelated.

“Anyway,” he said, “the only thing I can say for sure is that I lost.”

“I-I see.” Yagokoro knew well enough from their short time together that Ikki wasn’t the kind of person to lie, so she just slumped disappointedly in her chair, not pursuing the matter any further. “This isn’t enough to make for an exciting article. Maybe I could *enhance* it a little by using my imagination?”

“No.”

“I can make you say something cool when you lose!”

“No.”

“Ugh. Wuss.” Yagokoro shot him a dirty look, but Ikki would not budge. He had no idea what would happen if she, of all people, decided to dramatize him to her heart’s content. Unfortunately for her, he was so obstinate that even she had to fold. “Whatever. I’ll just

give up on writing an article about it.”

“I’d really appreciate that.”

“Y’know, Worst One, we just keep getting more and more excited about you. I can’t wait to see your fight with Moroboshi tomorrow! See you then!” she yelled to Ikki as she made her way to the bus stop by herself. As she left, Shizuku spoke.

“Shall we head back together, then? We’re staying at the same hotel.”

“Nah. I’m going to walk instead of taking the train.”

“Why? It’s rather far, you know.”

“Two helpings was way too much. I gotta do some exercise and digest all this,” he explained, but he also had one other reason that outweighed even that. “Moroboshi lit a fire in me, too. I just can’t calm down. Better to keep my body moving for a while.”

“I understand. Just don’t push yourself so much that it affects your battle tomorrow,” Shizuku replied. She knew that ten minutes by train wasn’t altogether too far for him in the first place, but she still made sure to leave him with a word of advice.

“Of course. I’ll save up plenty of energy.”

“Want me to come with you, Ikki?”

“Thanks, Alice, but no. Go with Shizuku for me.”

“All right. I’ll do that.”

“See you tomorrow, then,” Ikki said, jogging along a different path than the one Yagokoro had taken. “At the tournament!”

“He seems so happy,” Shizuku whispered with a delighted tone. Alice nodded in agreement.

“Yeah. Looks like he’s been flooded with the Seven Stars King’s fighting spirit. Not that I can blame him, since the boy’s ‘motive’ was just the desire for them to fight in top condition.”

“Still, I’m very surprised by how provocative Big Brother was.”

“Heehee. He just couldn’t hold back his raging energy. Despite being made fun of for his rank and being ignored by everyone else, Ikki continues to believe in his own potential. Thanks to that, he has a chance to test himself against the Seven Stars King. That alone would be motivation enough for a battle maniac like him, but his opponent is yearning for this battle too. He must be so happy and so proud of himself that he just can’t stay still. What a cutie.”

Ikki would head out to the next day’s fight with both his body and mind in top condition. Shizuku and Alice were able to guess as much from his cheerful expression.

“Too bad he won’t be able to win like that,” Kiriko interjected bluntly.

“Huh?” Shizuku gulped. “You really don’t think he’ll be able to win?”

“Not one bit.”

“Wh-What makes you so certain of that?!”

Annoyed that the Medico Knight had so confidently assumed her brother would lose, Shizuku doggedly questioned her.

“Call it a problem of mental fortitude,” Kiriko answered, narrowing her eyes. “I’m sure Kurogane is an incredible knight—he clawed his way up to Seven Stars despite being a Rank F, so I’m sure he’s got plenty of ability and grit. And he never flinched in front of Moroboshi, even challenging him head-on. ‘Amazing’ is nowhere near enough to describe his drive for self-improvement. But his mental fortitude just isn’t enough.”

“I’m sorry? It ‘isn’t enough’?”

Shizuku was clearly so angry that she was ready to kill, presumably because she’d taken those words as an insult to her brother. Alice attempted to soothe her, though, and argued with Kiriko in her place.

“You say he doesn’t have enough fortitude, but how can that be when he and Moroboshi both felt the same way?”

Alice believed that if it weren’t enough, Ikki wouldn’t have agreed when Moroboshi had talked about fighting at top condition. However, Kiriko only shook her head in refusal.

“It’s because you’re mistaken in your very view of Yuudai Moroboshi as a person. That which lies in his motives, his true nature, is not the same as Kurogane’s fighting spirit and desire to improve himself. Such tepid emotions would never have allowed him to overcome his injury; something else entirely supports him. His desire to find stronger foes and win honest victories comes from a different reason altogether—an almost pitiful sense of duty. Kurogane has the desire to win with pride against powerful enemies and the drive to always aim higher... but such simple ideals are nowhere near enough to let him claim victory.”



After splitting off from Shizuku and the others, Ikki did not head straight for the hotel on his way back. Instead, he took a detour to a small park separated from the busy streets. There, in a place far from the commotion of the night, where only the sound of bugs could be heard, he stood and yelled.

“Nobody is going to come here even if we get a little loud, so just give it up and show yourself.”

The person he was speaking to was the one who had shot him the killing glare he’d felt while he was walking to First Star. Moreover,

that same feeling had been following him around for some time. The entire reason had he chosen to go home alone was so he could speak with the one who was staring at him so fixedly.

The gaze had continuously pierced through him without alerting anyone else, including the Seven Stars King. That alone was enough to make him assume that whoever was following him was exceptionally skilled, and his assumption was quickly proven correct. Ikki gasped when he saw his pursuer's true identity as they emerged from the darkness.

"I never would've guessed it was you..." The sleeves of his kimono fluttered in the wind. His slitted eyes were like the tips of blades, and his facial features, though disrupted by a cross-shaped wound, were much like Ikki's. "...Ouma."



The person who had been trailing him was none other than the sole Rank A student knight from Japan: Ikki's older brother Ouma Kurogane, the Gale Sword Emperor.

"..."

After showing himself, Ouma said nothing, instead merely glaring at his brother. It certainly wasn't a calm look; some sort of malice or hatred seemed to be housed within. Whichever it might have been, his glare alone put immense pressure on Ikki.

Seeing his brother one-on-one made Ikki realize just how overpowering his presence was. Though they were about the same height, Ouma seemed one or two sizes larger than him. Even so, he steeled his resolve, not folding under the pressure as he faced Ouma's glare and posed him a question.

"So, what do you want? Considering what happened at Hagun, there's no way you're here because you want us to bond as brothers."

That was the first thing Ikki needed to know. No matter what, there would be no progress until he knew Ouma's business with him—someone like him wouldn't have come without some sort of demand. It was then that Ouma finally opened his mouth to answer.

"Of course not. There is only one reason I'm here: because I have something to tell you."

"You do?"

Ouma nodded at Ikki's perplexed response. Then, with his peculiar voice that boomed within the body rather than reverberating in the ears, he spoke once more.

"Withdraw from your spot in the Festival, Ikki," he declared with a powerful tone that would not take no for an answer.

"What?!" The sudden, bizarre demand shocked Ikki. Why did he have to forfeit his spot? "Think you could give me a reason to do that?"

"Must you be told to understand? How simple you are." Ouma frowned in obvious frustration. With that sour look still on his face, he gave his explanation. "It's because your very existence is dragging the Crimson Princess down."

"What did you say?" The reason Ouma gave caused Ikki's face to harden. "When do you think I've *ever* dragged her down? We don't need to throw baseless insults around."

"It's the truth. How many months has the Crimson Princess wasted competing with a Rank F worm like you just because of a single blunder? All of this is because of your deception."

"Deception?"

"Your skills, your strategies—everything you do is for the purpose of taking your enemy by surprise. The way you fight reeks of deception, and using trickery instead of power to secure victories is an

obscene tactic. That isn't strength, and one can never become stronger by following in the footsteps of a man who follows that ideal. Honestly, I lost hope during our attack. She and I share a Rank A designation, but her strength is nowhere near the level it should be at."

Her weakness was the result of her having been taken in by Ikki, someone who only pretended to be strong. Ouma was certain of that, and continued to speak as he began approaching Ikki.

"It's time for you to disappear, fool. The Crimson Princess far surpasses you."

"I see. So that's how it is," Ikki sighed, accepting Ouma's claim. After such a lengthy explanation, he finally understood what about him Ouma thought was dragging Stella down.

At the heart of it, Ouma was using his own value system as his basis for attacking Ikki. To him, strength was not the skills to win, but was the raw power held within one's existence. He believed that those with greater power would continue to grow, while those who defied that belief were nothing more than frauds.

You could be a little less rude about it, though.

It really was rude. Ouma's very assertion could only be taken as a refutation of the Worst One, for he still aimed for the top despite being a Rank F. Ikki found it very like Ouma to have such a pure view of strength. Naturally, though, he wouldn't accept such an assertion.

"I see why you think I'm dragging Stella down, but I have no reason to live up to *your* value system. Besides, even if you're right and I'm nothing but an imposter, Stella still loves me. Stella still wants to fight me again. And that's all that matters to me. Compared to our promise, your insults are nothing but dust in the wind, Ouma. You can't sway me that easily."

Ikki refuted Ouma's demands, leaving no room for discussion. Even so, Ouma hadn't expected that he would readily comply, so he didn't seem especially discouraged by it.

"You're a dull-witted boy. If you think I was making a request, you're mistaken—I was giving you an order. But since words won't be enough to make you obey my command, I will simply use my strength to *force* you to obey."

Clearly annoyed, Ouma sluggishly materialized his Device. In taking up Ryuuzume, a nodachi larger than the average Japanese katana, the atmosphere tensed around them, sending the birds in the park trees flying away in fear. It was almost as if they knew that when Ouma held Ryuuzume, the entire park was within range of the ensuing destruction. Ikki wasn't ignorant of that fact either, yet he remained unfazed.

"Good. I'm more than happy to get straight to the point."

With a smirk on his face and a fearless look in his eyes, Ikki materialized his own Device, Intetsu. He was already well-prepared to fight. The moment Ouma appeared before him, Ikki was assured that this encounter wouldn't end peacefully.

More than that, though, Ouma had claimed that the time he'd spent with Stella was a waste. Making that claim wasn't something he could simply laugh off, because to him, the days since their meeting were a treasure. For his own sake and for that of Stella, whom he loved so deeply, he needed to show Ouma exactly how he felt.

"You act like I'm some sort of pebble for Stella to stumble over, but let me show you just how wrong you are."

"Don't bare your fangs so readily, failure!"

Ouma's warning marked the start of the unofficial battle between the two Kurogane brothers.



Worst One versus Gale Sword Emperor. Their battle began abruptly in a city park. The first to take the initiative was Ouma Kurogane, who lowered his Ryuuzume, its blade emitting a faint glow like that of a firefly.

"Rah!"

He swung his sword at Ikki, who was charging at him, tracing a horizontal arc. The distance between them was still about thirty-five feet, which was too far away even for the nodachi, a weapon with incredible reach. At least, it should have been.

"Ngh!"

Ikki, already sunk down to sprint, hurried to push his body even lower until he was crawling on the ground. A cold wind blew just above him as rows of trees behind him were felled. Though the sword of steel would not reach him, a sword of wind was a different story.

It tore through the air, creating a narrow blade formed from a vacuum. The attack, aptly known as Vacuum Blade, was the most popular Noble Art among wind mages. Ouma, of course, had mastered its use.

"Haah!"

From far away, Ouma again swung Ryuuzume, firing off another Vacuum Blade. The slash that tore through the air as it approached was powerless compared to the Crimson Princess' Dragon Fang and other long-range flame abilities, but made up for what it lacked with its incredible speed and invisibility. As it was a difficult attack to avoid, it had a high propensity for dealing critical blows—but that didn't mean such a common skill would be enough to tame the Worst One.

"Hup!"

Evading each wind sword by the skin of his teeth, Ikki continued his advance. He closed the space between himself and Ouma, not hesitating for so much as a fraction of a second as he weaved between the colorless blades. His actions proved that he could clearly perceive the invisible Vacuum Blades, but how was he able to do so?

The mechanism lay within Ikki's line of sight. His eyes weren't locked on the blades flying through the air, but on the one in Ouma's hands. Though Vacuum Blade boasted supersonic speed, it flew forward in a straight line, following the arc traced by Ryuuzume. In much the same way as one could dodge a bullet by watching the timing of the trigger pull and the direction of the barrel, as long as Ikki's kinetic vision could keep track of the direction in which Ouma swung his sword, his reflexes would make it easy for him to evade the unseeable attacks.

"Hmph."

Ikki was charging directly at Ouma, slipping through the gaps in his attacks. Ouma must have decided that Vacuum Blade wouldn't be enough to win the fight, as he too began charging forward, planning to collide with Ikki. Foregoing the wind to attack instead with steel, he swung for Ikki's head.

"Haaaah!"

"Gh...!"

He's so fast!

Despite wielding a nodachi, a weapon with weight rivaling that of a spear, the speed and power behind Ouma's swing were far greater than those behind Ikki's. It wasn't the result of a difference in skill—both sides were about equal in terms of pure swordsmanship—but of Ouma's magic ability.

Ouma controlled the air, eliminating wind resistance, and a blade that moved uninterrupted would swing faster than one hindered by friction. Against speed like that, Ikki would be entirely unable to counter without using Ittou Shura. Concluding as much in an instant, he took a defensive stance.

"Kh?!"

In the next moment, Ikki's blood seemed to freeze as a chill overtook him—his natural response to the quiet sound that knocked at his eardrums.

"Oooooouugh!"

He abandoned defense and focused all of his strength on leaping backward, evading Ouma's slash. As a result, Ouma's descending blade slammed against the sandy soil of the park. It didn't stop there, immediately carving into the earth, leaving an incision the bottom of which was too far away to see.

"Whoa!"

The crack that split the ocher ground sent a cold sweat down Ikki's back. Stella's strikes shook the earth, which was impressive on its own, but Ouma took it a step yet further. The tremors Stella created were proof that she and her concentration were imperfect, as they were the result of the dispersion of her strength. A perfectly concentrated swing like Ouma's would not shake anything, instead deeply, quietly rending everything in its path as though slicing through gelatin.

How much mass had he needed to accumulate around his sword to have made that happen? Hundreds of kilograms? Thousands? Ikki had no idea, but he did know one thing: much like Stella's blows, Ouma's were far too dangerous to take head-on.

I can understand that incredible strength, considering his physique.

"You've changed a lot in these past few years, Ouma. Maybe a little too much. What's the secret behind your body?"

"Hmph. So you've noticed the anomaly within me before our blades have even crossed. Though it was through deception, it's clear that you wounding Twin Wings was no fluke." Ouma smirked in such a way that one of his canine teeth poked out. "But whether you know or not, there's nothing that you can do. You are a fraud, whereas my anomaly is pure power."

His claim wasn't an empty one. Though it wasn't the first time Ikki had been faced with attacks he couldn't take head-on, Ouma's swings would certainly be tough to handle. In the past, he had been able to use defensive tactics to nullify Stella's monstrous, ground-breaking strength, but that was only possible thanks to Stella's inexperience. In much the same way that a falling leaf would never be cut through by a wildly swinging sword, deflecting unfocused force was easy. In Ouma's case, however, there was no such weakness. His swordplay was perfect, showing not a shred of deviation or hesitation. A falling leaf would be cleanly sliced in two by his sword.

That means Ten'i Muhou isn't a safe bet.

If Ikki wanted to overcome his opponent's titanic slashes, he would have to come up with a different plan. Ittou Shura would allow him to simply parry the blows, but it was too early in the fight to start the one-minute timer that came with it. Before that, he had to ascertain the enemy's range of knowledge. In order to decide what his first move would be, he looked back on his previous battle experience.

"That's the face of a man who's wasting his time thinking."

Ikki's train of thought was stopped by Ouma's ridicule.

"I told you, there's nothing you can do," he declared amidst the night, and began taking action while remaining at a distance. However, rather than swinging his sword—which meant it wasn't another Vacuum Blade—he pointed its tip to the sky as if to pierce the

moon. “I’ve no intention of wasting undue time on someone like you. Chasing you around will quickly bore me, so I propose we set a time limit. Cut him off, Mukuu Kekkai.”

As he spoke that incantation, Ouma’s magic took form. The green glow that enveloped Ryuuzume suddenly intensified, and violent winds began rampaging across the battlefield.

“Kh!”

The gales, which kicked up so much sand that Ikki couldn’t even open his eyes, spiraled as they rose into the night air. Ikki, trying not to be pulled up along with them, dug all ten of his digits into the earth.

Ngh, a smokescreen?!

The sandstorm created by Ouma’s Noble Art had robbed him of his sight and ability to act. He was impressed by how effective the technique was, but immediately realized that such a way of thinking was horribly naïve. As someone who sought power and power alone, Ouma would never use a technique to hinder his foe; Mukuu Kekkai was sure to have some sort of terrifying direct effect.

“Wha— Hrk?!”

I-I can’t breathe!

That terrifying direct effect was that it deprived Ikki of oxygen. Thanks to the upward air current the attack created, all the oxygen on the battlefield was being carried up and away. Ouma had done this to remove the luxury of time that Ikki previously had.

“Ten minutes is all you have left. If you continue to fight, it goes down to just one. You have no time to begrudge your lack of strength—so face me with your full power.”

The Worst One was made to steel his resolve by the Gale Sword Emperor’s order. As Ouma had said, he had no time to hold back. Worse yet, Ikki had no idea what had happened in the many years after Ouma’s disappearance, but he had become many times stronger than Ikki remembered him being.

He’s not someone I can hold back against in the first place.

Ikki’s own strength was already meager. If he held back against a foe like Ouma, he wouldn’t be able to win. Accepting that, he ended his task of ascertaining Ouma’s strength and set fire to all the magic that ran through him.

“Ittou Shura.”

A blue, flame-like light erupted from Ikki, as did his fighting spirit. That spirit, as sharp as a biting wind, caused the trees in the park to tremble as they scattered still-young leaves. It had grown so strong that it held physical power—a result of the experience he’d gained from fighting so many powerful enemies—yet even that power was far from able to shake Ouma’s spirit in the slightest.

“By focusing all of your power into a short time period, you aim to defeat otherwise insurmountable opponents with explosive strength. Truly the culmination of an impostor’s skills. Just looking at you makes my skin crawl.” Even against the spirit that emanated from Ikki during Ittou Shura, Ouma was unperturbed, going so far as to show displeasure at how bored he was by the display. “Come, pebble. It’s time I kicked you off the path.”

With leisurely movements, he readied Ryuuzume to meet Ikki’s charge. His presence was absolute, like that of a massive boulder settled deep within the earth, unmoving. Ikki himself was almost shaken by the immense pressure he gave off, but he had already pulled his trump card. One minute was all the time he had left, and against an opponent like Ouma, he couldn’t waste even a single second.

“Haaaah!”

The black knight was ready to decide the battle with his charge. He kept his body bent low as he ran, as if he were a shadow creeping along the ground.

“Graaaaah!”

The Gale Sword Emperor moved as well. His wind-cloaked sword descended toward the neck of the shadow with speed beyond recognition by the naked eye. However, with the power of Ittou Shura, Ikki was even faster.

I can do this!

Ikki’s aim was to end the fight with a single counter. Making use of his speed advantage, he would parry Ouma’s blade, then follow up with an attack to the torso. To that end, he stared directly at the gale that aimed to lop his head off.

Don’t be afraid!

Not long earlier, Ouma’s blade had carved a large gash into the earth. If he failed to block it, his head could very well end up being sent flying.

Focus!

Surviving the Reaper’s guillotine required extreme focus. If he was to evade the falling sword, he would need absolute precision. Still, he knew he could do it; that was just how much he had trained.

Nooow!

He fearlessly encouraged himself, using his extreme focus to step within range of the falling blade.

...Huh?

At that exact moment, his legs stopped moving.



What's going on?

Ikki's eyes opened wide at the sudden irregularity that had occurred within him just as he was to clash with the Gale Sword Emperor. His surprise was to be expected, as it had happened at the very moment he'd planned to use his extreme focus to ward off Ouma's strike and leap in to attack. However, that crucial moment had been abruptly cut off, as if the link between body and mind had suddenly been severed. Despite him still being conscious, his body simply refused to move.

What in the world?!

He had no time to spend agape with shock, however, as he was the only one who had stopped moving. Ouma's strike was still heading directly toward him.

This is bad!

Ikki just barely defended himself from the incoming blade. Even so, he took a direct blow from power that had carved through the earth.

"Ngaaah!"

As if hit by a large truck, he was launched dozens of yards, stopped only by the stone wall he slammed into.

"Gahaaaah!"

The impact on his internal organs sent a mist of blood flying from his mouth; at least one had undoubtedly been damaged. Further, the bones in his arms were smashed all the way to the shoulder, as they'd taken the brunt of the impact. However, that was the only option that had been available to him.

What the hell was that?!

Ikki's question was directed at the strange stiffening of his muscles during the deciding moment of the battle. Why had his body frozen beyond his control in that moment? Never in his life as a Blazer had such a bizarre thing happened to him, and it was driving him crazy.

"Hmph. Why are you so surprised?" Ouma asked with irritation in his voice. "You fought the strongest swordsman in the world and thought nothing about you would change because of it? Even if you remain physically sound, that doesn't mean your heart made it out unscathed."

"Huh?!"

"Strange that you would come barking at me when you have yet to overcome her parting gift. You clearly don't know your place."

Not caring to hide his displeasure, Ouma hurled invectives at Ikki, then slowly moved into an attacking stance. He raised his arms such that his sword was horizontal. In the next moment, Ryuuzume unleashed its harshest glow yet and became surrounded with wind.

The wind seemed to suck in the very space around it, rolling and raging as it devoured the air. It was then shaped into an ethereal blade, forged by gales folded countless times over. A tornado sword that could sever all of creation, Ouma was using the Noble Art that had felled both the Crimson Princess and Raikiri.

“Kusanagi, the blade that severs the full moon. This ability is wasted on a fraud such as yourself, but I’m displeased with my poor aim from earlier. As such, I offer this to you as a special gift. Accept it, and die graciously.”

Spitting those last words like venom, the Gale Sword Emperor finally exerted his full power. His most powerful blow, an attack that he prided himself on, was now trained on the injured Failed Knight.

I can’t let him hit me with that!

Ikki had to escape at all costs. He was curious about the so-called “parting gift” that Edelweiss had supposedly left, but chased the thought out of his mind. He gave a desperate order to his failing body, still shaken from the previous impact, to use every last ounce of its strength to flee from the impending threat. However, he once again stiffened. His brain continued to beg his muscles to move, but they remained frozen and unresponsive.

Why?!

The first possibility that came to mind was that his muscles were failing to function because of the damage he’d sustained, but after confirming the severity of his wounds, he discarded the idea. He was markedly injured, but not to the point that he couldn’t move. Why, then? He hadn’t a clue.

Hrgh!

If nothing changed, he would take the brunt of the blow. He had to do *something*, so he racked his brain—his one working muscle—but failed to find a breakthrough. In the end, his consciousness was swallowed whole by the thousand gales of Ouma’s blade.

“Take a bite, Tiger Kiiing!”



Just as the compressed spiral of wind, bound to shred anything it touched beyond recognition, swallowed the Worst One, a boy with a yellow spear jumped between them. The boy, with a muscular form and the sharp eyes of a carnivore, was the Seven Stars King, Yuudai Moroboshi.

“Take a bite, Tiger Kiiing!”

His booming voice shook the air as he stabbed his spear at the descending tornado blade. In an instant, the golden light of magic ran through Tiger King, shooting out of its head. The beam it created then took on a familiar form: the head of a great tiger, its maw opened

wide to expose its fangs.

The golden tiger chomped down on the approaching tornado sword. In doing so, it quite literally took a bite of Kusanagi, the very ability that had toppled first-rate knights like the Crimson Princess and Raikiri all on its own. The half-eaten sword then dissipated until it was gone entirely. Moroboshi, still standing in front of Ikki to protect him, looked at the injured knight.

“You all right, Kurogane?!”

“M-Moroboshi?! Why are you—”

“Just bringing back something you forgot,” he said, tossing Ikki his student handbook. “I called Doc about it, and she told me you were walking home alone. Figured I’d just head to your hotel, and what do I find along the way but a flashy brothers’ quarrel?”

Moroboshi then turned his attention to the Gale Sword Emperor.

“Been a while. I think the last time we saw each other face-to-face was elementary school?”

“The Star of Naniwa. Or I suppose you’re the Seven Stars King now, aren’t you, Moroboshi?”

“Hah. I don’t want *you* calling me ‘King’. A title won in a tournament without you is a worthless one. But hey, none of that matters now.” The two were former rivals who had once fought each other in the Little League. As the two spoke, Moroboshi frowned and surveyed the sorry state of the park. Fissures and crevices that littered the area, trees uprooted by the fierce winds, and one cracked stone wall. “This went a little far for a brothers’ quarrel, though. One of you’d be dead if I hadn’t stepped in.”

“Tiger’s Bite, a Noble Art-nullifying skill that can bite away any technique. You even tore away Mukuu Kekkai when you stopped my Kusanagi, I see.”

“Yep. That means your storm’s got no effect on me. Now that we’ve made that clear, I wanna ask you: are you gonna keep up this pointless carnage? If you wanna keep making a mess of my home, I’ll gladly take up fighting you.”

Moroboshi gave his threat with a menacing tone. He then pointed his magic-enveloped spear, Tiger King, at Ouma, intimidating him with its ability to nullify any and all Noble Arts. In response to his threats, Ouma closed his eyes and allowed the glow of his Ryuuzume to fade.

“No, I’ve lost my appetite for battle.”

Even his trump card, the strongest of all his techniques, was easily defeated by Moroboshi’s Tiger’s Bite. With reinforcements having arrived, perhaps he’d realized his odds of winning were poor.

No. He wasn’t such a noble man. Rather, he had simply, honestly lost any reason to continue his fight. As if losing the last of his

already-weak interest, he glared daggers at the fallen Ikki, still on the ground behind Moroboshi.

“If you’ve not accepted the last piece of Twin Wings’ parting gift, then you will fail tomorrow regardless of whether I finish you right here. I have no need to deal the final blow myself. When she sees your pathetic defeat, perhaps the Crimson Princess will open her eyes at last.” Leaving them with that last bit of vitriol, he turned away and stepped into the darkness from whence he came. As he did, he left them with one last comment. “Saved by a forgotten handbook? Hmph. What a lucky man.”

“He looks a lot different than he did back in elementary school, but he’s just as unfriendly as ever,” Moroboshi sighed annoyedly as he watched Ouma leave. Once the boy had disappeared, Moroboshi turned back to Ikki, who was leaning against the stone wall. “So, what was that all about? I heard him say something about Stella; you guys better not have some sorta love triangle thing going on. I mean, two bros who’re in love with the same chick? That’s, like, straight outta Lurren Gagann.”

“Ugh, stop. I just about died back there,” Ikki chuckled at Moroboshi’s casual tone and slowly stood up. “Anyway, thank you. You really saved me. And my handbook, too.”

“No prob, man. But more importantly...” Moroboshi suddenly narrowed his eyes. “What *was* that, Kurogane? Even watching from afar, you were acting plain weird. That couldn’t’ve been ‘cause of your injuries, right?”

The one thing that bothered him was Ikki’s apparent inaction just as he was about to be killed by Kusanagi. But little did he know that Ikki was the one most confused by it.

“I don’t know either, honestly. I can’t make heads or tails of it.”

There was no foreshadowing of the event. Up until it happened, Ikki had believed he was in perfect condition for the tournament. All he could do was to shake his head.

“Really? To me, you looked like a deer in headlights.” Moroboshi calmly explained things as he saw them. “Then again, you’re stronger than that.”

That much was obvious. A knight who would take the stage at the Seven Stars wouldn’t be so afraid of an enemy’s technique that he would freeze up, and that was especially true of Ikki. The Worst One had faced the Crimson Princess’ Katharterio Salamandra and had the guts to smirk at it.

“...Ah!”

It may not have been possible that he’d been afraid, but Moroboshi’s thoughtless statement led to a flash of inspiration within Ikki.

“You fought the strongest swordsman in the world and thought nothing about you would change because of it? Even if you remain physically sound, that doesn’t mean your heart made it out unscathed.”

The words Ouma had spat at him during their battle actually seemed to ring true. Ikki had fought the world’s strongest sword fighter and lost, yet he seemed to be in perfect health. Could that really have ended so anticlimactically, so conveniently? Could one truly have toed the line between life and death, only to return without being changed in any way? Wasn’t that idea too naïve?

Those thoughts gave Ikki a bad feeling, accompanied by a cold sweat that rolled down his back. What had happened to him was a common occurrence within the various realms of fighting. If a boxer suffered an awful loss, they would start to be afraid of their opponent’s punches. In an average fight, where multiple punches get exchanged in the space of a second, their body would stiffen and freeze up, almost like a form of PTSD. As long as one suffered from such a disorder, they would be unable to fight—a problem which some fighters considered to mean they were “broken”.

Could Ikki perhaps have subconsciously become “broken”? The physical he’d undergone after his fight with Edelweiss showed no abnormalities, and he was able to train as normal, but neither of those situations involved any danger to his life. What if, then, he had just never noticed it until Ouma’s raw desire to murder him exposed that mortal fear?

Such a supposition, while unimaginably terrible, was not terribly unimaginable. In fact, as Ouma had claimed, it would have been much more abnormal for him to have played a game of life and death with the world’s strongest sword fighter and *not* have come out scarred in some way. After a battle such as theirs, it should have been expected for either his body or his mind—if not both—to have been irreparably damaged.

“Why the scary face? Something come to mind, maybe?” Moroboshi asked. He must have noticed that Ikki got paler the more he thought.

“...No, not especially.”

Ikki couldn’t explain why. He couldn’t show weakness to his future opponent. At least, that was one reason he kept quiet.

“I want you to use that motivation to build up your energy and get yourself in perfect condition for tomorrow’s match.”

He swallowed the lump in his throat. There was simply no way he could breathe a word of his weakness to someone who was so excited to fight him.

“Huh. Well, I better call you a doctor. You should sit down for a while.”

Moroboshi spoke once more after looking at him for a short time, but he didn't pursue the matter any further. Instead, he merely procured an ambulance using his student handbook.

"Thanks. Sorry."

A mixture of gratitude and apology filled his words as he put a broken hand up to his chest. Ittou Shura had finally worn off, filling him with its usual heavy fatigue. The fatigue dulled the full-body pain brought on by the injuries he'd sustained, but the fear in his heart that he might be a broken knight was not relieved in the slightest.

What's happening to me? And my body?

Even after he had received treatment and returned to the hotel, Ikki continued to ask himself the same questions. He pushed his consciousness deeper and deeper within himself, searching for an unobstructed view of his body and mind. No matter how deep he went, though, he could find no traces or wounds; he could only think of himself as sound in both body and mind.

Was he really broken? If not, how could he explain the moment his body had seized up? He didn't know, and without knowing, he couldn't hope to overcome the problem.

Things were looking grim. There was a time bomb ticking inside of him, which would make it foolhardy to challenge the Seven Stars King. After freezing at the climax of battle, how could he hope to win against such a foe? It was something he had no choice but to overcome, but as if laughing at Ikki's fretting mind, the light of day finally broke, heralding the morning when everything would truly begin.



"Many say that war is evil, for it breeds hatred! Many say that peace is magnificent, for it nurtures kindness! Many say that violence is a sin, for it harms others! Many say that cooperation is a virtue, for it fosters love! All those with common sense know this, of course, yet we humans still strive for strength!

"To be the strongest and most heroic of them all! To have absolute, unrivaled power that enables you to make your desires a reality! Who can say that they don't wish for that?! Who can say that they have never longed for as much?! Everyone desires it at some point, and everyone gives up on it at some point, as it is unattainable! But for those still chasing that dream, we arrive at the Festival at which these young men and women put their lives on the line in search of victory!

"Hokkaido's Rokuzon Academy! Tohoku's Kyomon Academy! North Kanto's Donrou Academy! South Kanto's Hagun Academy! Kinki and Chubu's Bukyoku Academy! Chugoku and Shikoku's Rentei

Academy! Kyushu and Okinawa's Bunkyo Academy! And finally, the newly established National Akatsuki Academy! A total of thirty-two students have been chosen from Japan's eight schools, every last one of them an awe-inspiring knight, but only one can claim the title of Japan's Seven Stars King!

"Fortunately for them, it is a custom among us knights to use our weapons to decide whom shall bear such a title! And to our thirty-two virtuous knights who have come here to take up those weapons, the time has come! Only here will none disapprove as you fight to your hearts' content and the full extent of your power!

"And now, without further ado, I proudly announce the start of the sixty-second Seven Stars Battle Festival!"

HAGUN ACADEMY BULLETIN

CHARACTER TOPICS

COPYEDITING: KAGAMI KUSAKABE

OUMA KUROGANE

■PROFILE

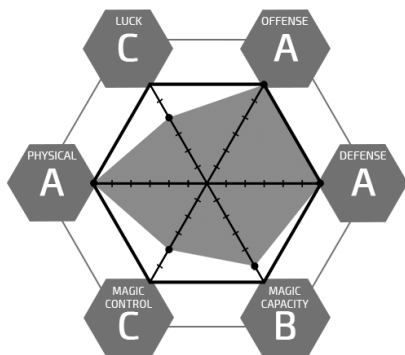
AFFILIATION: NATIONAL AKATSUKI
ACADEMY, YEAR 3

BLAZER RANK: A

NOBLE ART: KUSANAGI

NICKNAME: GALE SWORD EMPEROR

SUMMARY: FORMER TOP-RANKED
STUDENT AT BUKYOKU ACADEMY



KAGAMIN CHECK!

The only Japan-born Rank A student knight. In elementary school, he was the king of the twelve-and-under league. He was made famous by those two things, but he hasn't participated in a single official match since he started middle school—he's even been absent from the Seven Stars in past years. This year marks his return to the spotlight, though. Nobody knows where he was or what he was up to, but his strength is real. He's definitely one of the favorites to win this year.



“...Mn.”

Far from the Festival, at Hagun Academy, a knight finally awoke in a hospital ward. She opened her heavy eyelids to find an unfamiliar white ceiling.

Where am I...?

She was taken aback somewhat by the sight. Not only was it exceedingly rare for her to be sent to a hospital, but her mind hadn't caught up after she'd been asleep for so long. The first thing she did, as she still didn't know what was happening, was to reflexively sit up. When she did, the creaking of the bed prompted the girl next to her, the blonde-haired, blue-eyed Kanata Toutokubara, to tear her attention away from the television.

“Touka! You're finally awake! Thank goodness...”

She put a hand to her chest and breathed a sigh of relief.

“Kana— Ngh! Mah pung...” Upon seeing her, Touka immediately bit her tongue.

“Don't expect too much from your body right now. You've been asleep for a very long time.”

“‘Asleep’?”

She didn't understand. What could have caused her to sleep for so long that her motions were so heavy and languid? Touka tried to remember, reeling in the snapped line of her memories.

“The first round of the Seven Stars Battle Festival is already halfway over, and this match, the final match of block B, has drawn the most interest of them all! First up is a first-year student from Hagun Academy: the Crimson Princess, Stella Vermillion! Her opponent is a third-year student from Kyomon Academy: the Icy Sneer, Mikoto Tsuruya! On analysis, we have Coach Muroto. What do you think—”

“Ah!” The analyst's voice coming through the television sparked her memory. During the attack by Akatsuki, she had led the student council in an attempt to stop them and protect Stella, but was defeated by the Gale Sword Emperor, Ouma Kurogane. Completely in the dark on what all had happened in the time since then, her face turned pale. “Kana, wh-what happened? Are Stella and Kurogane

okay?!”

“Yes, they’re fine. Ms. Vermillion was protected by the Hagure sisters, and though he sustained some injuries, Kurogane recovered and went to Osaka for the Festival. We were taken down by Phantom Form weapons, so there were no major injuries. You and the vice president took the most damage, however, so you’ve been asleep for some time.”

“Uta has, too?”

“Yes.”

Kanata’s gaze moved behind Touka. Following her line of sight, Touka realized that Utakata was still in a deep sleep in the bed next to hers.

“Uta...”

“Like you, the immense fatigue has delayed the recovery of his consciousness. But that’s all; there’s no danger to his life. I’m sure he’ll wake up today or tomorrow.”

“I see. That’s a relief.”

After hearing the summary of what happened after she fell, Touka sighed deeply.

I guess I should be glad I at least managed to carry out my duty as the student council president.

If nothing else, they had avoided the complete destruction of Hagun. That was enough, in her opinion. It was all thanks to her friends who had stayed on the front line with her.

“Thank you, Kana.”

“Heehee. You should say that to everyone else, too. They’ll appreciate it.”

“Yeah. I’ll do that.”

As soon as those words left her lips, something happened.

“Uh-oh! We’ve got a major problem here, folks!”

The play-by-play announcer’s voice had risen to almost a scream.

“My, they’re in an uproar. What sort of trouble do you think they’re in?”

“I’m not sure. What could it be?”

Kanata’s and Touka’s eyes naturally fixed on the television. Onscreen, the person giving the play-by-play was sweating buckets behind his glasses as he described an unbelievable event.

“Incredibly, Stella Vermillion has yet to come to the arena! She’s not responding to the signal to start the match!”

“Whaaat?!”



She’s not responding to the signal?!

Kanata had told her that Stella was safe, so the announcement

surprised Touka greatly.

“Kana, you said Kurogane was at the Festival arena. Was Stella not with him?”

“I don’t know the specifics, but her defeat at the hands of the Gale Sword Emperor bothered her deeply, so she went to train with Ms. Saikyou. Perhaps that would explain why she was not with Kurogane.”

“Maybe. But if she was with Ms. Saikyou, then this doesn’t make sense.”

Why would that lead her to not being present for the start of her match? Touka and Kanata were worried and confused, but they quickly got an update through the television.

“Oh? We’ve just received word from the committee. Stella Vermillion’s train was delayed due to some issues along the route, so she will be arriving late.”

“That’s a shame. Still, this is why we had the party two days ago—to avoid things like this.”

“Right. If only she’d come to Osaka early with the other Hagun students... Hm? What’s this? Icy Sneer Mikoto Tsuruya is petitioning the committee for a victory by default!”

“Is Stella truly going to lose because of this?” Kanata asked as she stared at the screen, worried.

“No. I’m sure she’ll be fine.” Touka shook her head. Last year, she had participated in the Seven Stars as Hagun Academy’s team captain. Because of this, she had a good grasp of the Festival’s rules. “Showing up days in advance isn’t a rule at all. In fact, if a contestant is late to their match, the match is usually postponed.”

“Ooh! I’ve just received a message from the committee. ‘According to the rules, block B’s fourth battle will be postponed. Because of this, the request for a victory by default has been denied!’”

“Well, rules are rules.”

“Is there no penalty for being late?”

“In this case, no, because the committee has confirmed her story using the railroad’s schedule. That said, we *have* been pushing to make advanced arrival a rule in order to avoid incidents like this.”

At the Seven Stars Battle Festival, decisions were made by a meeting of the committee. Much like in other combative sports, once decisions were made, there was no overturning them. In other words, thanks to their decision, Stella would not automatically forfeit, prompting a sigh of relief from Kanata.

“Phew. I was getting nervous.”

“But if she doesn’t arrive in time for the delayed match, she’s out.”

She'll be there by then, right? I hope so.

Incidentally, Stella's match would have been the last of block B's matches for the day. With block B technically complete for the day, an announcement rang through the arena.

"We have a message for everyone present: There will be a ten-minute intermission as we set up for future matches. Afterward, block C's first match will begin."

"So the first round is already halfway over. I can't believe I missed it all. Hey, Kana? Has Kurogane's match already happened?"

"No, his is the fourth match of block C. You've not missed a thing."

"That's great news." As he was the person who had defeated her and taken her spot, Ikki's was the one match she simply could not miss. "By the way, who's his opponent?"

"Oh, that's right. You can't have seen the tournament brackets yet."

"Nope. So, Kana, who is Kurogane's opponent in his first match?"

"I think you, more than anyone, will find this matchup very interesting." Kanata made a difficult expression, as if trying to stifle a smirk. That look gave Touka a bad feeling, which was quickly proven correct. "The Worst One's first opponent is the Seven Stars King, Yuudai Moroboshi."

"Kurogane's in a tough spot right from round one, huh?"

"Yes. We should know as much from his selection battles, but he and good luck are unacquainted."

"I guess you could say that legends often find themselves faced with greater trials."

Initially, Ikki hadn't been matched up against the Seven Stars King. The major reduction in contestants, however, had caused Moroboshi's seeding, which had originally given him a first-round bye, to change. Ikki had certainly gotten the short end of the stick.

He's like a black hole that draws in all sorts of bad luck.

"The Worst One and the Seven Stars King. How do you view this match, seeing as you've fought both of them?" Kanata asked out of the blue. Because of the intermission, the broadcast had been paused—perhaps she was simply bored.

"Well..." Touka closed her eyes, thinking for a bit before answering. "I'd say it's sixty-forty in Moroboshi's favor."

"Sixty-forty is quite the narrow margin, considering who Kurogane's up against."

"It might be a crazy prediction considering their different standings in society, but there's a good reason for it."

"And what might that reason be?"

“Kurogane has a favorable matchup against Moroboshi. Do you know about Moroboshi’s Noble Art, Tiger’s Bite?”

“That’s the one that consumes other Noble Arts, yes?”

“Yeah. We Blazers can use Noble Arts, which are essentially magic. The ability to devour other Blazers’ magic like that gives him an incredible advantage over just about anyone else. Lorelei’s ice, the Crimson Princess’ fire, the Gale Sword Emperor’s wind—none of it works on Moroboshi. His Tiger King can just chew right through all of it.”

“As I recall, that’s what forced you to fight him at close range.”

Touka responded with a nod. One year ago, her lightning had been nullified entirely by Tiger’s Bite. Thanks to that, she had made no progress fighting from afar, leaving close range as her only option. She’d bet it all on her lightning-fast Raikiri strike, but Moroboshi’s adroit use of his spear had kept him out of her striking range until he’d won the match. The memory was still bitter for her.

“Hearing it again, it really is quite the unfair ability.”

“Yeah. Though its use is limited in non-Blazer battles, in exchange, it gives him an incredible advantage against Blazers. But that’s the problem: Kurogane isn’t the kind to rely on magic. His fighting style is extremely rare among Blazers, focusing more on physical combat. He only uses magic once a battle, and Tiger’s Bite is a Noble Art that only nullifies Noble Arts. It’s not meant as an offensive technique. Moroboshi’s going to be limited to physical combat—that is, his skill with the spear. He has the upper hand in terms of range, but an advantage as basic as that won’t be enough to stop Another One. Not by a long shot.”

In the same way that Raikiri had been at a disadvantage against Moroboshi, Ikki too would have to fight against the spear’s long reach. However, his mobility and foresight—along with his mid-range experience—far exceeded that of the average student knight. Even the Seven Stars King himself would have trouble keeping a swordsman like him at bay.

“Does that mean you think there’s a chance for a first-round upset?”

“Definitely.”



At the very least, Touka was certain that it wouldn't be a one-sided beatdown. She had fought both the Worst One and the Seven Stars King, and the way she saw it, Ikki's close-range fighting ability was definitely at the national level. There was no doubt in her mind that he had the strength to compete for the title of Seven Stars King.

Still, it's still pretty awful luck to have him as your first opponent.

That didn't matter, though. As long as Ikki was in good condition, it wasn't out of the question for him to make an incredible upset.

"Go get 'em, Kurogane!" Touka cheered, sending her support all the way from Tokyo to Osaka.



"We have an announcement for everyone present. Arena preparations have been completed, and we will now begin block C's first-round match. Contestants in block C, please gather in the waiting room."

The bowl-shaped Coastal Dome was informed that the ring in the center of the artificial turf arena had been readied for its next group of users. Among those who had heard the announcement were Ikki and the others, who had watched the previous match with such interest that they'd pressed themselves against the fence in front of them.

"I'd better get to that waiting room, then," he said to Shizuku and Alice, who sat with him. He would be fighting in the fourth match of block C, so he had no reason to rush, but no reason to be late, either.

"Good luck, Ikki."

"I'm rooting for you, Big Brother. What's Stella's deal, though? It's one thing for her to be late for her own match, but she's even late for yours."

"I think you've got that backwards."

"Time to put the murder methods I learned from *The Mother-in-Law's Guide: 108 Ways to Torment a Newly Married Woman* to the test."

"Haha... Well, take it easy on her. Later."

After soothing Shizuku, who was irate that Ikki's own girlfriend would be too late to cheer him on, Ikki left the two behind to head to the waiting room. All they saw on his face was a look of pure relaxation—a look too tranquil to belong to a man who was heading into battle.

"Good," Shizuku sighed in relief after seeing him off. "He doesn't seem as nervous as he was before."

"Heehee. Well, of course he's not. He went toe-to-toe with Twin Wings, you know. He's beyond being afraid of someone like the Seven

Stars King.”

Shizuku nodded, as Alice’s claim made perfect sense. Maybe their battle had started working in his favor. If nothing else, Shizuku had no reason to doubt as much.

“Hi there. You two remember me from yesterday?”

Suddenly, a familiar voice reached her ears. A girl in a white coat waved as she approached from the direction Ikki had left in.

“Kiriko.”

“Why, we certainly run into you often.”

“Aha, you sure do. Maybe it’s fate.”

“I’d rather not be drawn to the doctor by fate.”

Kiriko shrugged exaggeratedly at Alice’s joke before putting on a serious expression.

“I just passed by Worst One. Did something happen to him?”

“What do you mean?” Shizuku was the first to react to her disquieting question. “I thought my brother seemed very relaxed.”

She couldn’t figure out the basis on which Kiriko believed otherwise. In response, Kiriko agreed, taking it just a bit further.

“He’s *too* relaxed.”

“Huh?”

“I did a quick examination as we passed by each other. His pulse, temperature, and perspiration... even the hormonal balance in his bloodstream, it was all too normal. Usually, all types of people experience some sort of change in those levels before a fight, but his haven’t changed in the slightest.”

That was impossible for a human. The previous day, Kiriko had claimed that he was in a state of excitement when he was with Moroboshi. For some reason, however, all traces of that excitement had vanished from him.

“That’s a sign that he’s deliberately forcing himself to relax,” she continued. “He wasn’t like this yesterday; his excitement levels then were optimal for someone who was getting ready for a proper fight. Has something happened to make him uneasy?”

Big Brother is uneasy?

“A-Are you a hundred percent sure?!”

“My diagnoses never lie. Not that I know what it is that’s got him so worried, though.”

“Couldn’t it just be that he’s relaxing so he doesn’t overexert himself?”

“I highly doubt that. A reasonable level of excitement increases one’s ability in battle, and I find it hard to believe he’s the kind of knight who wouldn’t know that. It really makes you wonder.”

Kiriko’s grim diagnosis invited an uncomfortable silence to fall over the group. Amidst that silence, Shizuku thought back on her

conversation with Kiriko from the night before, after Ikki had split off from the rest of the gang. She recalled what she'd been told about the Seven Stars King, Yuudai Moroboshi, whom Ikki would soon face in battle.

※ ※ ※

“And what does this ‘almost pitiful sense of duty’ entail?”

Shizuku couldn't help but to pose her question in an interrogating tone. From her point of view, by claiming that Ikki couldn't win against Moroboshi, Kiriko had just unfairly insulted her beloved brother. However, Kiriko did not make that claim without reason.

“You remember Moroboshi's little sister from the restaurant, right? And you remember that she was mute?”

“I do, yes. The Seven Stars King told us that it was a mental thing.”

“It was because of Moroboshi that she became mute.”

“What?!”

“At least, that's what he believes. I don't really agree with it.”

Kiriko began to tell Shizuku the origin of the feeling of responsibility that carried Moroboshi forward. Six years earlier, everything had started when tragedy struck Kansai's greatest young knight, a boy known at the time as the Star of Naniwa. “On a weekend, Moroboshi and his family left by train for a park. However, there was an accident. It made national news, so I expect that you two know about it as well.”

Shizuku nodded, as she and her family had been watching the news as that story broke.

“I remember that hundreds of people died in the disaster. I never knew that the Seven Stars King was in it until my brother told me earlier today, though.”

“Yes. So many lives were lost in that awful tragedy. The fact that he's still alive today may mean that Moroboshi is extremely lucky. But he was far from being uninjured. His sister and parents had gotten away with only minor injuries, but he wasn't so lucky, and lost both of his legs.”

“He ‘lost’ them? As in, he was crippled?!”

“That's right. Capsules, the pinnacle of modern science and medicine, can reattach lost arms, legs, and, depending on the situation, even heads. They're miraculous, to say the least. However, they can only reconnect; they can't recreate limbs that have been completely mangled.” In other words, Moroboshi's wounds were beyond healing by even modern medicine. “Though he survived, the

Star of Naniwa—hailed as the most talented knight in all of Osaka since the Demon Princess herself—was forced to withdraw before the final tournament of his Little League career.”

It must have been horrible for him, to the point that it was unbearable. But at the time, Moroboshi was crippled, unable to even walk. How could he have fought like that? It had to have been an awful decision to make, but that was his fate. His inherent cheerfulness had allowed him to adapt to his new life without knighthood.

“However, there was someone whose emotions could not adapt the way his did.” It was his sister, Koume Moroboshi, Kiriko explained. As for why, there was one sad reason. “The day of the accident, she was the one who had insisted that they go to the park.”

“Ah! Th-Then Koume...!”

“Correct. She blamed herself for it all.”

If Koume hadn’t pestered them to go to the park, her brother would have lost neither his legs nor the promising future he deserved. If she hadn’t been so selfish...

She continued to blame herself for what had happened to him, so much so that her heart broke. As a result, she lost the ability to speak. It was as if she had chosen to never force anyone to listen to her selfishness again.

“I had no idea.”

“Ailments of the heart and mind are complex. Unlike injuries or bodily ailments, the symptoms and treatments are far too individualized. We doctors are, unfortunately, powerless. One man remains, though, who continues to try to heal her ailment.”

Based on the sense of duty that Kiriko had mentioned, Shizuku knew precisely who that man was.

“That would be Yuudai Moroboshi, yes?”

“Yes. At the time, he’d given up on knighthood, but the calamity within her lit a fire inside of him.”

Kiriko then claimed that, not even six months after the accident, Moroboshi visited her after having somehow caught wind of her research on limb-regeneration magic through the use of cells from the rest of the body.

“Please, Doc! Make it so I can fight again!”

He probably hadn’t even told his family about his plan before he’d crawled his way from Osaka to Hiroshima. His muddled, tattered body had seemed to ooze determination.

“I willingly agreed to his request. Not because I was impressed by his zeal in any way, though; his appearance just presented a good

opportunity for me. I'd been searching for a guinea pig, after all." Her honest, straightforward statement was also rather alarming. "Teehee. You must think I'm horrid. At the time, though, I was certain that I could do anything—that it was *okay* for me to do anything. I didn't hesitate in the slightest as I marched into God's territory, creating limbs willy-nilly."

"Then Moroboshi's legs are..."

"Mm-hmm. I scraped tissue from all over his body, broke it down to the molecular level, and then formed it into false legs that would imitate his old ones."

As a fellow water mage, Shizuku was aghast at the Medico Knight's skill. There were probably fewer than three water mages in the world who could recover someone else's lost limbs. Furthermore, using her method, Moroboshi's body was the only source of tissue, removing any chance of his body rejecting the new limbs as foreign matter.

"Hmm. But if you used tissue from the rest of his body to recover his legs, which are almost half the body, wouldn't that leave the rest of him in rather poor shape?"

Shizuku had also considered the question Alice posed. In response, Kiriko confirmed the pair's apprehension to be true.

"You're quite perceptive. Yes, he was in very poor shape. First, obviously, all of his muscles were deteriorated—to an almost life-threatening extent. Additionally, to make bones as big and durable as the femur, I had to drastically reduce his bone density, giving him osteoporosis."

After the treatment, Moroboshi was so weakened that breathing alone hurt his sternum. The only time he had ever been that close to death was during the accident itself. That, however, was only the beginning.

To get his skin-and-bones body to move with the same freedom it had before the accident, he had to rebuild his musculature. He didn't have time to waste, either, as if he didn't do so quickly, his muscular atrophy would put his life in even greater danger. To prevent that from happening, Kiriko forced him to put his twig-like self through muscle training similar to that done by professional athletes.

"Of course, in his state, even that wasn't going to be enough."

His hollow bones would shatter. His muscles would snap in two. His tendons would constantly tear, causing nerve ruptures. He gritted his teeth as he ran with broken legs and lifted dumbbells with broken arms. Of course, every time he broke, Kiriko would use her recovery magic to bring him back. Yet that only meant that he would face the pain of breaking thousands of times.

The rigorous training he'd undergone was tantamount to torture.

Vomiting and incontinence were daily occurrences. Kiriko recalled that Moroboshi's rehabilitation was like a living hell.

"After three months, I was forced to give up."

"No surprise there. He went through far too much."

"I can't believe he lasted that long."

Alice and Shizuku figured that he gave up far too late, if anything. What he'd done no longer fell under the category of rehabilitation. Continuing that would have been the most bizarre thing one could have done. However, their expectations were betrayed.

"You've got it wrong. *I* was the one who gave up, not him."

"Huh?"

"Just as I always do with guinea pigs, I kept a log of my observations. But clearly, he's no guinea pig; he's a human just like you and me. Watching a fellow human go through months and months of suffering like that made me feel like I was going insane. To be honest, I really believed I was. Even in my dreams, I could hear his cries."

After three months, Kiriko could think nothing except that her research was the devil's play. She had to put it to an end immediately; modern prosthetics were incredible enough. They wouldn't be able to carry magic or function as smoothly as his old legs, and it would be impossible for him to revive his career, but at the very least, there were prosthetics efficient enough that they wouldn't get in the way of his everyday life.

There was no reason for her to have him continue with his rehabilitation. Having decided as much, Kiriko finally proposed that they put an end to it and that she use her magic to return the makeup of his legs to his upper body.

"But then, Moroboshi told me something."

Kiriko could recall the exact words Moroboshi had said to her. His face glistening with sweat, his breathing ragged, he pleaded with her to let him keep going.

"Doc, do you know what the last thing Koume said to me was? She was sobbing up a storm, and she just said, 'I'm sorry'. Ever since that day, she hasn't said a single word, and it's all because I'm such a wretch, because I got hurt like this. I made her think she was indebted to me. I made her think her wanting things was a crime."

"So no, I'm not stopping now. I gotta tell her that there's nothing to apologize for, that she doesn't have to worry. But I can't do that if I'm like this. Everything I lost in that accident—my legs, my strength, my status—I'm gonna take it all back and show her that I'm okay through results instead of words. If I don't, she'll keep blaming herself forever!"

“That’s why, until Koume forgives herself and starts talking again, it doesn’t matter how many bones I break or muscles I tear! I’m never gonna let her see me hunched over in pain again! That’s what it means to be a brother!”

“After that, Moroboshi kept going with his rehabilitation. He refused to give up. And a few years later, his desperate struggle finally bore fruit. Yuudai Moroboshi, the Star of Naniwa, returned to center stage equipped with strength not inferior to what he’d had before.” He then climbed all the way to the peak of Japanese student knighthood, becoming the Seven Stars King. “But even then, Moroboshi hadn’t achieved his self-imposed duty. Until the day Koume speaks again, he’ll continue to struggle.”

Not even his desire for a real fight with Ikki was for the sake of his personal ambition; it was all for his sister. The driving force that had let him crawl his way up from the depths of hell, the willpower born from his brotherly duty, still burned unceasingly within him. Kiriko knew that full well, which was why she also knew about his strength.

“As someone who’s been watching him progress since day one, I can guarantee you this much: Yuudai Moroboshi isn’t the kind of boy who can be defeated by the simple ambition of wanting to win. Those who fight for people other than themselves are truly strong.”



Their talk of memories and Moroboshi’s awe-inspiring eagerness to throw himself into battle sent a shiver down Shizuku’s spine. For the sake of getting his sister to speak again, Moroboshi had recovered from career-ending injuries and made a miraculous return to knighthood. His determination and tenacity as he overcame torturous rehabilitation were infinitely beyond the realm of the average person.

There’s no doubt that he’s strong. Both in body and mind. Shizuku couldn’t imagine that he would be bested by someone clouded by doubt. *Big Brother, please! You have to get a hold of yourself!*

With emotions almost akin to prayer, Shizuku gazed at the blue gate, where Ikki would at some point emerge from. Then, in her periphery, she spotted a tiny girl with bobbed hair seated directly above it.

“Ah...”

It was Moroboshi’s sister, Koume, staring at the red gate. She, just like Shizuku, was waiting for the moment her brother would emerge. Unlike Shizuku, however, she looked as though she was harboring a terrible pain.

“We have another message for everyone here today. We apologize for the long wait, but we will now begin the first match of

the Seven Stars Battle Festival's C block!"

The announcement heralded the start of the matches, prompting Shizuku to turn her attention to the arena, but she continued to think. If she were in Koume's shoes, how would she feel? If Ikki had lost his legs because of her, and if he had surmounted so much pain and suffering just for her... and if all she could do was wait and watch as he suffered through a world of fighting, a world where everyone continually injured each other, how would she feel?

"...Nh."

The result of that line of thinking was pain that threatened to rend her heart.



Block C progressed smoothly, without any of the delay-related difficulties that block B had run into. While its battles were taking place, after some moderate warming up, Moroboshi lowered himself into a folding chair and stared at a single sheet of paper. On it, a message was written in cute, round handwriting.

"Go get 'em!"

The night before, Moroboshi had not returned to his hotel room. After sending Ikki off in the ambulance, he'd returned to the still-packed restaurant, helping out for so long that he decided to just spend the night at home. As a result, though, he'd received that message from Koume before he'd left home. After all, Moroboshi had asked her to write it before he'd left for the opening ceremony.

"Hey. Mind writing 'Go get 'em!' like you always do?"

It was like a good luck charm for him, so he would always make that request before his matches. Each time he did, Koume would look at him and frown momentarily before breaking out into a smile and writing it out for him. Just as she always did.

"..."

As he looked at the message, Moroboshi recalled his sister's split-second frown. It seemed so apologetic, so pained. He knew exactly what she was thinking when she made that expression.

For so long, she'd known that her brother had made this comeback for her sake. Of course, not once had he acted like he was doing her any favors, but as they shared the same blood, she could understand his thoughts to an extent. That made her hesitate all the more to send him off with a cheer of "Go get 'em!", as though her brother fighting for her was none of her business. Moroboshi could see through to that truth, and he chuckled softly.

"Silly."

There's nothing to be sorry about, Koume. You didn't do anything wrong. She didn't have to worry; all she had to do was to recover at

her own pace. He didn't care if it took years or even decades. *Until you're all better, I won't lose. I'll just keep on winning until you realize you haven't taken anything from me, and you finally recover. Then, we'll be just like we were in the good old days.*

"To the fighters in the waiting room, block C's third match has ended, and we will now begin the fourth match. Hagun Academy's Ikki Kurogane and Bukyoku Academy's Yuudai Moroboshi, please head to your entrance gates."

"All right! Time to win this thing!"

Just watch, kiddo!



"In the last match, we witnessed Byakuya Jougasaki's strength as he forced his opponent out of the ring and held them there for ten seconds, resulting in a TKO. Quite the performance from last year's runner-up, wouldn't you say, Coach Muroto?"

"Absolutely. But I must say, it's rather unsatisfying for a Mage-Knight to win that way. I understand that such a rule is in place to protect the contestants, but it does leave the viewer wishing they had settled it properly in the ring, haha."

"I see. And I'm sure there are many spectators that would agree with you. In that case, we'll just have to wait in anticipation for a fitting conclusion to the next match! Now, we've kept everyone waiting long enough. Our next matchup may be the most attention-grabbing one in all of Japan. Let the fighters enter the arena!"

The voice of the play-by-play announcer, Iida, was followed by the gates being lifted. Then, the two fighters for block C's fourth match entered the arena.

"First, from the red gate, we have last year's victor: third-year student at Bukyoku Academy, Yuudai Moroboshi! With his innate talent and superhuman skill with the spear, along with his ability to chomp away a Blazer's magic, he climbed to the top of the tournament! However, the way up was not as easy as one might expect!

"An awful accident just before his final Little League tournament led to him losing his legs, an injury that would be more than enough to spell the end of a knight's career. However, against all odds, he returned to us! He conquered injuries once thought unrecoverable, leaping from the depths of hell to the peak of Japan! A boy who knows both the glory and the frustrations of chivalry, Seven Stars King Yuudai Moroboshi! Today, he makes his appearance in a bid for the first-ever two-win streak at the Seven Stars Battle Festival!"

Instantly, the arena erupted with cheers.

"Boshi! Boshi!"

“Just listen to that crowd! The Dome is quivering under its mighty roar! That’s a hometown hero for you! His popularity’s through the roof!”

The shower of cheers sounded almost like the rumbling of an earthquake. No other student knight in Japan could hope to be anywhere near as popular.

“Hrrraaaaah!”

Faced with their overpowering expectations, Moroboshi materialized his Device, Tiger King, and pointed it upward as if to pierce the heavens. It was an act that seemed to say, “Leave it to me”. When he did so, the venue reached a fever pitch.

“Wooooooooooooooooo!”

“This is incredible! Moroboshi, confronted with cheers loud enough to shake the earth, doesn’t hesitate for a moment! He’s not cowering in the slightest! He’s carrying all those hopes, all that anticipation on his shoulders with ease! What a man! What heroism!”

“This is just what people love about Yuudai Moroboshi.”

“Care to elaborate?”

“As you’ve said already, Iida, he made a comeback from impossible-to-recover-from injuries; I’m sure he’s more worried about his condition than any other fighter is about theirs. But he doesn’t show an ounce of discomfort as he carries the burden of all the hopes people have put on him. Not only that, but he’s been successful in meeting those expectations, too. It’s almost like he’s saying, ‘Don’t worry about me, I’m just fine’. Oh, and speaking of severe injuries, I actually once underwent the same type of procedure as he did.”

“I hear one of your legs is a prosthetic, Coach Muroto.”

“It is. You see, it’s common to lose body parts in the KoK. There’s a major demand for limb-recovery operations like the one he went through, but almost nobody—myself included—has seen success with them. Do you know why that is?”

“No, actually. Could you tell us more?”

“Well, the operation itself has nearly a perfect success rate, but nobody can keep up with the rehabilitation that comes after. The procedure uses flesh and tissue from existing body parts to form the missing ones. Afterward, the patient suffers severe osteoporosis and muscular atrophy, often leading to symptoms of organ failure or hypofunction. In order to recover your lost muscle, you have to do intense muscle training. In other words, to get your body back to normal, you have to train during your recovery period. You end up with thousands upon thousands of pulled muscles and broken bones over time. Even an adult like me just couldn’t take it. I was begging the doctor to put me back only three days in!

“Moroboshi, on the other hand, overcame that hellish

rehabilitation, and with greater power than ever before. That's not something you can do with just grit or resolve. Honestly, I can't even begin to imagine how the King could lose here today. Every aspect of his abilities is at a higher level, and he has such raw courage and daring."

"Interesting. It makes me all the more excited for his second consecutive victory! And look! The Seven Stars King's first opponent has just entered the arena!"

In response to the announcer's words, the whole crowd focused on the blue gate. Amongst all the attention, one boy walked coolly, armed with a black katana.

"This boy is showing up everywhere! He was the talk of the nation during the scandal involving the Crimson Princess, and now he's here, the first Rank F to ever take part in the Seven Stars! Oh, but don't let his rank fool you; his strength is *very* real! In his selection battles, he defeated Raikiri, Moroboshi's most troublesome opponent last year, in a single blow! Plus, though it was an informal battle, he even defeated the Rank A Stella Vermillion.

"Known to some as Another One, the Uncrowned Sword King, he's definitely got unorthodox strength! The true underdog of this tournament, the weakest warrior with the strongest sword skills, it's the first-year from Hagun Academy, Ikki Kurogane, and he's just made his way into the ring!"

Loud cheers arose from the audience, though they were nowhere near as loud as the ones Moroboshi had received. Everyone was eagerly awaiting the sight of just how much the unorthodox weakling could upset the stage where Japan's strongest student knights fought for the top. Alice couldn't help but to gasp at the sight of the crowd's enthusiasm.

"The time has finally come for Ikki to stand on the national stage."

An ill-starred knight, unappreciated and unfairly treated by all, now stood in the national arena, accepted by all as a powerful warrior. For those who had been watching him since his first selection battle, it was a deeply moving sight.

"Yeah. But Big Brother can't lose here. He's aiming even higher than that," Shizuku replied firmly, then turned her attention to the doctor next to her. "Kiriko, how would you say he's doing right now?"

"Hmm. Just a sec. Stethoscope." As she said that, Kiriko closed her left eye, focusing her magic into her right to examine Ikki from afar. Afterward, she grinned ever so slightly. "Teehee♡ No surprise there, given all the bloody battles he's overcome."

"What does that mean?"

"He's not as unnatural as he was when I walked past him. He's

fully entered fighting mode, with his body's hormonal balance and blood pressure displaying the proper amounts of nervousness and excitement. He must have gotten his feelings in order while he was waiting. Relax, Shizuku. Your brother is undoubtedly in top condition!"

With the scene ready and the actors present, a gong signaled the start of battle.

"It's time to begin the next battle in the first round of the Seven Stars Battle Festival! The fourth match in block C, it's Yuudai Moroboshi versus Ikki Kurogane! Let's go ahead!"



The instant the signal was given, Ikki kicked off from his starting position and sprinted toward the Seven Stars King.

"Whoa! Kurogane isn't wasting a single second! He's already on the offensive!"

The announcer was audibly startled by Ikki's charge, leading to a wave of similar surprise throughout the venue. He was attacking without even taking the time to assess his situation. Careless, impatient, hasty—many would feel that it was a poor idea. Alice, however, had carefully scrutinized his options.

"Great thinking!" she praised.

"Alice?"

"There's nothing Ikki can do from a distance, because he has no skills that work at long-range. The key to his victory is breaking past the range of Moroboshi's spear and getting into his own range with his sword." In other words, a swift attack was his best option. "A spear's strengths and weaknesses are all based on reach. If he can get close enough, he'll easily be able to get the upper hand!"

"But Moroboshi's fully aware of that. He's not just going to stand there and let someone get in close to him."

As if to back up Kiriko's claim, Moroboshi moved to protect himself. He was unperturbed by Ikki's swift attack, moving with composure as he angled himself such that his shoulder was drawn back, Tiger King's spearhead waiting for its prey. Everyone in the Dome immediately got goosebumps, shudders creeping down their backs.

"Hnn...!"

Shizuku, watching from the audience, was no different.

"Wh-What a man! His posture alone exudes such a strong pressure!"

As the announcer stated, the stadium-wide shudder was caused

by the intense pressure that Moroboshi exuded as he took up his stance. The once-bustling crowd was frozen in silence; that one boy had captured the full attention of the tens of thousands of spectators in the arena.

Despite his swift decision-making from seconds before, even Ikki was forced to halt his charge in the face of that pressure. Moroboshi had the same glint in his eye that had stopped Yui Tatara two days earlier: Predator's Sense. The pressure only lasted a moment, however, and Ikki then put even more strength into his halted legs, continuing his sprint toward Moroboshi.

"Kurogane may have stopped once, but he won't shrink from battle now!"

"He's got guts, for sure. A normal knight would have faltered and tottered around under the Seven Stars King's pressure, but he hasn't lost one bit of his sharpness."

Coach Muroto praised Ikki's courage, but Moroboshi already knew of his daring. If he wanted to put the Worst One down, he would need more than just some pressure.

"Hah!"

Just as Ikki, unshaken, stepped into Moroboshi's range, there was a flash of light as Tiger King pierced through the air. Ikki performed a backstep to escape the attack, but wasn't able to make it out completely unscathed—some of his hair scattered onto the ground. He had been a split second too late to dodge, owing to the spear's incredible speed.

Cheers filled the arena once more in response to Moroboshi's counter.

"See how sharp that was! That thrust tore through the air so fast, I think I can hear the wind from up here! Kurogane was forced to retreat. Moroboshi has ended his opponent's charge with a single blow!"

"That wasn't a single blow."

"It wasn't?"

"Try zooming in on Worst One's chest."

Iida operated the play-by-play camera in response to Muroto's command. In doing so, the venue's huge screen revealed multiple holes in Ikki's clothes.

"Wow! His clothes are torn in two places!"

"That's right. Include the haircut, and that makes three strikes total. It's the Seven Stars King's Astral Trio, a triple spear thrust that looks like only a single stab from afar. Because Moroboshi's incredible Noble Art allows him to break enemy magic, people often fight in a way that removes that from the equation. In my opinion, though, his honed skill with the spear makes for a more dangerous weapon.

Weaving your way through his attacks is a Herculean task; Worst One needs to take extra care to really plan out when and how he intends to make his move.”

Muroto’s confident explanation was tantamount to common sense. A direct charge would be too rash against the spearman whom Ikki had locked eyes with, as the spear boasted unmatched power against enemies in a straight line. Ikki’s surprise attack at the start of the match had failed, so he had to find some way to break through from the side. That much was obvious, which made his next move all the more bewildering.

Not running, not leaping, he almost seemed to stroll nonchalantly toward Moroboshi. Incredibly, he got about five feet from his foe—perfect striking range for the spear, but not for the sword—before stopping to stand completely still.

“Whaaat?! What in the world is Kurogane planning! I-It’s almost like he’s *asking* his opponent to attack!”

Both play-by-play and analysis were agape. His actions were entirely incomprehensible; they almost looked to be provocative. Then, a few members of the audience caught on, and one section of the arena erupted with shouts.

“Don’t underestimate him, Boshi! Kick his ass!”

“This Tokyo kid’s just got a big head!”

As if responding to their voices, Moroboshi repeated his special move from before: a volley of stabs known as Astral Trio.

“There he goes! The Seven Stars King comes in with a furious assault on his fearless opponent!” It was a rain of death, not unlike a bullet hail let loose by a machine gun. Unavoidable, unblockable—or so it was thought to be. “I-It’s not working! The attacks aren’t hitting! Even with its incredible speed, Astral Trio hasn’t put so much as a scratch on its target! Kurogane is avoiding the spearhead so elegantly it almost looks like he’s dancing! Talk about magnificent footwork!”

Ikki was avoiding Moroboshi’s Astral Trio, which could strike thrice in the space of a single breath, by moving left and right instead of forward and backward. The Noble Art was so terrific that it could almost have been said to be superhuman, but despite being well within its range, Ikki was evading every blow. It was a situation that he had intentionally put himself in, for he knew of a technique far faster and far sharper. It was the Sword Eater’s Marginal Counter.

The Sword Eater’s Marginal Counter far surpassed a human’s maximum reaction speed, allowing him to strike eight times in such rapid succession that it created the illusion of simultaneity. Compared to that, Astral Trio could be followed by the naked eye with ease; it wasn’t nearly as overpowering as the impossible illusion of eight fangs closing in all at once. Ikki needed only to calmly read the spear’s path

of movement and he would have no trouble dealing with Moroboshi's technique.

For ten full seconds, Moroboshi attacked and Ikki evaded. As if deciding that it was a fruitless endeavor, Moroboshi leaped back to create distance between them once again.

"Moroboshi can't take it! He's been forced back! Incredible, Ikki Kurogane! It's like he's paying the King back for that pressure at the start of the match, forcing him to retreat without landing a single hit!"

"The heck?!"

"No way!"

"Whooooa! That guy's seriously a Rank F?!"

"So cool!"

"Cheers and cries alike rise from the crowd. These fighters sure know how to make a match exciting!"

"He's making it very clear how he managed to achieve victory over past representatives like The Hunter and Raikiri. I've never seen a fighter as quick and fearsome in mid-range combat as he is. That said, it seems that neither fighter is giving his all quite yet."

Muroto's gently whispered words were the truth. Though it looked as though Moroboshi was overwhelmed, he curled his lips into a smirk and spoke to Ikki.

"You've got some nerve, making me a part of your warm-up. Well? Feeling good yet?"

"Yeah. Thanks to you, I'm absolutely certain now. I'm definitely in top form today."

Neither side had meant for their game of cat and mouse to be a true trading of blows. Ikki had stepped into the danger zone and continually evaded Astral Trio for the sole purpose of making sure that his body did not flinch in fear, and, understanding that goal, Moroboshi had offered a helping hand. Ikki thanked him for his kindness, for it was because of him that he could have conviction.

His legs carried him well. His movements were sharp. His field of vision was wide and clear. Even if he had only narrowly evaded Moroboshi's spear, there was not the slightest bit of fear in his heart. There was no sense of unnaturalness like there had been when he'd fought Ouma the night before.

Ikki could fight. With that realization, for the first time since the starting signal, he wielded his sword with a true thirst for battle.

"Perfect." Moroboshi nodded in satisfaction. "That's the end of your free lunch, then. Time for me to get serious."

The pressure emanating from Moroboshi instantly grew stronger, to the point that just looking at him made it hard to breathe. It was undoubtedly the pressure given off by a King. However, Ikki still knew that he could win. He had gleaned an important piece of information

from their short exchange.

The way Moroboshi uses his spear is exactly the same as it was in the videos I watched. He has a fatal weakness!



"I like that look on Kurogane's face. Seems like he's found the hole in the Seven Stars King's fighting style," Touka muttered, watching the television broadcast from a hospital room at Hagun Academy.

"Is there a hole in his fighting style?"

"There is, though you'd only be able to find it by researching tons of videos like he did. I bet he used their little skirmish to confirm his suspicion."

"I don't understand. What could it possibly be?"

"Think about it this way, Kana: if you used a spear, how would you attack?"

Kanata thought for a moment before deciding on her answer.

"I imagine I would use stabbing attacks."

"Of course you would. Spears are made for stabbing, after all. But their incredible reach gives them another method of attack: sweeping."

There was more to a spear than just its pointed head. With enough force behind it, the hard staff, usually over a yard in length, could easily break bones. Sweeping techniques were especially prevalent among certain Chinese spearmen, who would often use stabs to force their foe to dodge before swinging their spear like a club. The sweep of a spear couldn't compare to the swing of a sword, of course, but that didn't mean it was something that could be ignored.

"But the Seven Stars King doesn't use sweeps when he fights," Touka continued. "He's not just avoiding it now; in every match since his comeback, he's only used stabs. That includes his match with me, of course."

"My, I never would have noticed that," Kanata declared in surprise, but with a refined tone befitting of her usual manner of speaking. "But why is it that he only uses stabs? Does he simply believe that's all he needs to win?"

"Stabs are strong. With very little effort, you can strike fast and hard, since the power is all focused at the one end. Moroboshi's Astral Trio goes even further, removing the danger inherent in pulling the spear back. Chances are that it's his strongest possible method of attack, so maybe, like you said, he never needs to sweep to beat his opponents. That changes when he's up against a master like Kurogane, though."

No matter how fast or sharp it was, a stab could only attack a

fixed point. It seemed almost harmless in comparison to the wide-range attack that was the sweep. Worse, it was highly predictable, and the follow-through would cause one's body to naturally lean forward, making it easy for their foe to counterattack.

"A dodged stab gathers no blood," she explained.

"In other words, you're saying that Kurogane's reflexes are going to ensure that he has little trouble overcoming Moroboshi's fighting style?"

"That's... what you would normally think."

Touka grinned in a way that was unusually wicked for her.

"'Normally'? What do you mean?"

"Unfortunately, the guy Kurogane is up against isn't normal. If what I just said is what Kurogane is thinking, he's in for a world of hurt—just like I was a year ago."



"What's this?! Kurogane's on the offensive again!"

Just as Touka finished giving her vague, grave warning, the match in Osaka jumped back into action. Ikki had confirmed that he no longer harbored any fear, and once again closed the distance between himself and his opponent, ready to expose the hole in Moroboshi's fighting.

"But Moroboshi's not going to let him have his way so easily! He counters with another Astral Trio!"

Naturally, Moroboshi led off with a counterattack, using his long reach to preempt Ikki's charge. For the first blow, Ikki moved right to dodge the spearhead aimed at his forehead.

One!

Then, he stepped left to dodge the one that came for his heart.

Two!

Moroboshi's Noble Art attacked three places in the space of one breath. It was a terrifying skill, but it was the result of endless training and repetition rather than an inherent, superhuman ability like the Sword Eater's Marginal Counter. Thus, Ikki could react to it with ease.

I've dodged two, so the next one is the last! After that, Moroboshi will pause! Three was probably the most he could stab without stopping to breathe. Thus, Ikki had decided that the third and final stab would be his chance to counterattack. The moment he dodged, he would leap into sword range. I'll squeeze in there and draw first blood! It might not take him down, but I'll at least get a leg up on him!

The third stab was trained on Ikki's femur. When it came, he immediately put his plan into action.

That's three! Now!

No matter how fast or well-executed, a stab could only attack a single point. If he dodged even inches left or right, it wouldn't hit him. He sidestepped to the left, ready to pounce into sword range.

I'll get a nice hit to his torso, and—

As Ikki escaped the stab and prepared his sword to slam into his opponent, a jaw-dropping event occurred in his periphery. The head of Tiger King immediately turned left, changing directions to follow its prey like a snake that had missed its initial strike.

“Hrrrnhg?!”

The spear continued its pursuit. Though he was dumbfounded by the nonsensical sight of it, Ikki made the split-second decision to give up on pressing forward. Instead, he jumped to the left once more to move out of the spear's range. He'd made a hairbreadth escape, but it did not leave him entirely unscathed.

“Wh-Wh-Wh-Whoa! Kurogane, who dodged Astral Trio with ease! Moroboshi, who seemed to be stuck in a defensive battle! Their skirmish, which seemed clearly in Kurogane's favor, has just been turned upside down! Kurogane's earlobe has been half-torn off! The King draws first blood!”

The crowd stirred at Moroboshi's drawing of first blood. Ikki, however, showed no interest in that blood as it trickled down his neck. What interested him was his opponent's attack, which made him shudder so powerfully that it shook him from head to toe.

Wh-What was that stab?! I never saw anything like that in the videos!

By watching countless videos of him, Ikki had researched Moroboshi's fighting style inside and out. That was what had made the hole in his fighting style so clear to him. That attack was different, however; never before had he seen Tiger King behave that way. Ikki first thought it a new skill, but quickly decided that it couldn't have been—not with the very peculiar problem it posed.

Why didn't play-by-play say anything about that? Did they not see it?



Ikki's hypothesis was correct: no one in the crowd had noticed the curving of the spear.

“Argh, darn! I thought for sure he was going to get him that time,” Alice frowned in annoyance. She had seen Ikki prepare to strike but fail to take the chance. It was quite the shame. He'd only needed a little more.

At least, that was how it had seemed to her, who thought it a shame because she had only seen that Ikki had failed to dodge the final blow. If she knew what had truly happened in that moment, her view would have been different.

In that last skirmish, Moroboshi had lured Ikki into his trap by

coercing him to set upon taking advantage of his weakness of only using stabs. It was an ambush designed to subvert Ikki's belief that all he had to do to be safe was to move to either side. Everyone in the audience—Alice included—held that belief as well.

"Was he, though?" She hadn't seen the spear curve, but Shizuku still had her doubts.

"Shizuku? Something up?"

"Look at Big Brother's face." Even from a distance, Ikki was visibly shaken. "If it were as simple as him flubbing his dodge, he wouldn't look so wary. Something happened down there that we couldn't see. And the one who made it happen must have been Moroboshi."



There was someone aside from Shizuku who knew that something was amiss—someone who had anticipated the outcome.

"I thought he'd use that," Touka Toudou, the Raikiri stated. It was natural that she had predicted it, because she had fallen for the same trick the year before. "Though he hit me directly in the side with it, since I couldn't avoid it."

"President, is there some secret to his stabs? To me, it only seemed as though Kurogane failed to dodge the third and final blow."

"I said before that the weakness of a stab is how easy it is to avoid as a result of being focused on one spot, but Moroboshi's stabs overturn that basic logic. No matter where you dodge, his attack curves to follow."

"It... curves?"

"Yeah. And by using what you could call his 'pursuing stab', Moroboshi altogether removes the major drawback of stabbing."

"But from what I saw, it didn't appear to bend at all. Further, his ability has nothing to do with altering his reach. Blazers each only have one type of ability, so I can't imagine that he's able to change the shape of his Device the way the Sword Eater does."

"It's no surprise you didn't see it bend. You couldn't have, because it doesn't. Like you said, what he's doing isn't the result of his Noble Art; it's a skill that relies on his physical abilities, just like Astral Trio."

"Hm?"

"Anyway, now that he's drawn first blood, Moroboshi will go on the offensive and press his advantage. This is Kurogane's moment of truth."

"The Seven Stars King advances!" the TV blared. Once again, the match developed just as Touka had predicted. "The tables have turned!"



He's out for blood before I can even get my head straight? He definitely knows!

Ikki grimaced at Moroboshi, who was coming at him for the first time since the battle began. He clearly knew that Ikki was confused.

"Hup!"

The sharply thrust head of his spear was aimed at Ikki's foot, a calculated assault that aimed to decrease his mobility.

I'd better give up on attacking and focus on dodging for now! I'll keep evading until I get my rhythm back!

Ikki reminded himself to calm down and attempted to evade the impossible-to-stop stab by going back a half-step. With enough force behind it to audibly cut through the wind as it moved, the spear pierced fruitlessly into the stone floor, presenting Ikki with the perfect opportunity.

Or perhaps it wasn't. Instantly, the spearhead burst from the surface of the ground, heading straight for his face.

Gaaah! He bent his neck as far as he could to evade a direct hit, but the attack still managed to graze his cheek. *There's no question about it anymore. I'm not sure how, but Moroboshi's stabs are curving!*

Moroboshi's spear, a weapon that was supposed to be firm and straight, was bending like clay. It was an unbelievable sight, but having seen it twice, Ikki was forced to believe.

However, twice was not the end. Every stab bent in much the same way. Right, left, up, down—it was like some sort of illusion. Every last one of them pursued Ikki in whichever direction he dodged.

This is insane! I can't just keep side-stepping; sooner or later, I'll get skewered!

Quick dodges were only going to work for so long. Without any other method of protecting himself, Ikki's only option was to remove himself entirely from the spear's range.

"What's going on with Kurogane?! As if his beautiful dodges from before never even happened, he seems to have gotten cold feet! Back and back he jumps, like he's single-mindedly trying to escape!"

I am trying single-mindedly to escape!

Ikki chuckled at the play-by-play announcer's criticism. However, fleeing did not equal losing—it was, in fact, a strategy employed specifically to prevent losing. Even if it was a shameful sight, his eyes were still set on victory.

Moreover, he was doing more than simply running away in fear. He was observing Moroboshi as he fled, summoning all of his wisdom as he neared the secret of Moroboshi's pursuing stab.

Play-by-play has made it all too clear that nobody else can see it. If

they could, the announcer wouldn't have said what he did. He would have been praising Moroboshi's impossible attack rather than criticizing Ikki. *That must mean that the mechanism behind this is...*

"Whatcha doin' there, Kurogane?!" Moroboshi taunted. "You're never gonna win if you just keep running!"

Yet again, a flash of steel pierced the air. Since the start of their battle, Ikki had been focused on the spearhead each time it was thrust at him. Given that some mysterious ability was being used to make it follow him, it only made sense that it would steal his attention.

That was wrong. I shouldn't be focusing on the spearhead, I should be focusing on Moroboshi's wrist!

Finally, Ikki had arrived at the truth of Moroboshi's attack. As the next stab came at him, it did not escape his perception that the moment Moroboshi thrust his spear, he flicked his wrist and changed the angle of his elbow, altering the trajectory of his Device.

Ha! Thought so!

Ikki's guess was right on the money. The spear never truly curved, it only appeared to do so by moving with such speed that it created an optical illusion. As he thrust it, he curved it. As he curved it, it pierced. It was as simple as that.

Though simple in concept, executing those motions while stabbing thrice with such speed that it appeared as a single stab was an impossibly difficult feat. So many actions were being performed in such a short period of time that it went beyond the realm of what a person should have been able to do; it was too much for the human brain to keep up with. The ability to do so, then, was because Moroboshi had engraved the movements into his muscles, his bones, and even his blood.

What could only be described as a triumph of the human body's capabilities was the result of an enormous amount of incomprehensibly arduous training. As a result, Moroboshi's stabs needed no orders from his brain, pursuing their prey of their own accord. It was such an extreme physical skill that it was indistinguishable from magic. For that reason, the Seven Stars King had given the ability a name: Comet.

What an incredible skill!

A physical feat that laughed at human limits. It, too, was unlike the innate ability belonging to the Sword Eater; it was a miracle created by constant effort. Ikki had to respect him as a fellow martial artist. His fighting style, which took the spear's weakness of being able to attack only a single point and transformed it into an advantage, was nothing short of impressive. Once more, Ikki was glad that he had made it to the Seven Stars and could fight astounding knights like Moroboshi.

Just fighting isn't enough, though!

In discovering that Comet was nothing more than a physical technique, he'd also discovered that it was possible to counter. The key to Comet's strength was that it attacked enemies who had left themselves defenseless by evading.

"All I have to do is not evade!"

Ikki's fighting style changed instantly. He used Intetsu to swat away a Comet aimed at his neck, giving up on his retreat in favor of a forward charge.

"Ngh?!"

Moroboshi tried to retaliate by quickly using a Comet-enhanced Astral Trio, but if they weren't dodged, they were nothing more than regular stabs. With the trick behind it exposed, Ikki had no trouble swatting it away, parrying until he was in point-blank range.

"Whoa! Kurogane's undergone a sudden transformation! He's stopped his fancy dancing and is now making a bold forward plunge! Sparks fly as he elbows his way through a shower of steel, steadily closing in on Moroboshi!"

As a result of the abnormality, Moroboshi gritted his teeth for the first time since the start of their fight. A normal foe could never charge through Astral Trio's high-speed assault even if they'd learned how to overcome Comet.

Ikki, however, was no normal foe. He was capable of such a charge. His incredible observational skills—the same ones that made Perfect Vision and Blade Steal possible—had already identified some of the quirks and inclinations of Yuudai Moroboshi's spear technique. In his relentless pursuit of Ikki, the Seven Stars King had shown off too much of his fighting style.

"Haaah!"

"Moroboshi has the face of a madman as he unleashes his high-speed spearmanship! But Kurogane just won't quit! He keeps on shoving his way through the veritable phalanx of spears!"

"This is a rough situation for the Seven Stars King. A spear's advantage comes from its reach. When the enemy gets in too close, its effectiveness falls by at least half. Moroboshi has to find some way to drive him back!"

Unfortunately for Moroboshi, as long as Ikki could foresee his moves, he would be unable to deter the charge no matter how many inconveniences he added. It was only a matter of time before Ikki put himself within sword range, and once a swordsman like him gained that advantage, he would never let it go. The moment Ikki got close enough, the battle would be over.

"Dammiit!"

With Ikki just one step outside of sword range, Moroboshi released another Astral Trio in hopes of deterring Ikki. His last resistance was for naught, though, as Ikki had already stolen his spearmanship. Using the angles of his elbows and his line of sight, Ikki could instantly perceive where each strike would end up. He repelled the first and second with ease, and took his final step into range in time with the wind-up of the third.

“Kurogane has finally gotten within striking range of Moroboshi!”

“Boshiii! Get outta theeere!”

Cries rose from the stands, supporting the cornered King. But Moroboshi still had the last strike of his Astral Trio, and much like both it and Comet, he had one more super-speed technique that waited not even for thought. It too was guided by the muscle memory resulting from millions upon millions of repetitions. Additionally, he was not the kind of person who would flee when told to.

He moved, ready for his final stab to pierce Ikki’s chest. However, Ikki knew all the ins and outs of his spearmanship, and had foreseen the attack’s angle and path. There wasn’t the slightest chance that he would fail to swat it away.

Once I deal with his last thrust of Astral Trio, I’ll be able to end this! It’s time for me to— No, wait! This is bad!

Lightning ran through Ikki’s brain as an unbelievable spectacle unfolded in the arena. He, who had cornered Moroboshi to the last, was struck in the shoulder by Tiger King and launched out of the striking distance he so coveted.



“Wh-What in the world just happened?! Kurogane clearly had the upper hand as he advanced, but he was suddenly bombarded! He’s been launched far away by a stab to the shoulder!”

“No way! Big Brother lost an advantage like that?!”

Shizuku lost her composure at the unexpected development. But next to her, Alice turned pale at a yet-more-unbelievable sight.

“Shizuku! Look at Intetsu!”

Practically screaming, she pointed out what she saw to Shizuku.

“N-No...!”

“I can’t believe my eyes! Kurogane’s Device, Intetsu, has been broken! It’s as if some giant beast took a bite out of it!” Indeed, a large chunk had been gouged out of the blade of Ikki’s Device—the crystallization of his very soul. “What could have caused this?! Unless something extreme happens, Devices typically never so much as bend, let alone break like that!”

The announcer was at a loss, but that was only natural. Blazer’s

Devices were super-high-density crystallized magic. Iida had been doing play-by-play for Mage-Knight battles for quite some time, but he could count the amount of times a Device had been broken on one hand. Muroto, however, began to talk in an excited tone.

“No, there is actually one exception!”

“Really?”

“Yes! Take a look at the Seven Stars King’s Tiger King!”

All eyes in the venue gathered on Moroboshi. They noticed all at once that, without their realizing before, his spear had taken on a golden glow. Everyone present knew what that aura of gold meant, of course.

“A-Amazing! At some point, the Seven Stars King activated his Tiger’s Bite!”

Tiger’s Bite was Yuudai Moroboshi’s pride. It was also the strongest known anti-Blazer ability. The night before, it had effortlessly destroyed even the Gale Sword Emperor’s Kusanagi.

“But why would he use that right now? Kurogane wasn’t using a Noble Art, was he?” Iida then gasped as he came to a realization, and his expression warped with shock. “N-No way!”

“Now you know. Indeed, erasing a Noble Art just means erasing some sort of magic. A Blazer’s control over magic doesn’t only extend to their Noble Arts, though; their Device is also made of magic!

“In the year since Moroboshi became King, it seems he’s acquired some incredible strength. Until last year, his Tiger’s Bite was only powerful enough to erase Noble Arts, which are created using a portion of a Blazer’s magic. Yet this year, Tiger’s Bite has become able to tear apart even Devices themselves, the super-dense crystallized magic formed by the Blazer’s very soul!”

Even Touka, watching the battle from all the way over in Tokyo, choked in shock.

“That’s insane!”

“President, doesn’t this put Kurogane in quite the awful position?”

“‘Awful’ doesn’t even begin to describe it.”

As the Blazer’s soul, the shock to the senses resulting from a broken or shattered Device was liable to render its user unconscious. If Tiger’s Bite had the strength to chew through a Device, then crossing blades with Moroboshi was tantamount to offering up one’s heart and begging for death. Fortunately, the attack hadn’t been enough to shatter Intetsu’s blade entirely, but a second hit would not be so forgiving. Ikki could no longer use Intetsu to block Tiger King, and in losing that, he also lost his one way of fighting back against Comet.

There’s no weakness for him to take advantage of! Touka thought as a shiver ran up her spine.

It wasn't just her, either. Kanata, who was watching the fight on the television with her, as well as Ikki's other friends watching from inside the arena all shuddered at the sheer terror that was Tiger's Bite. The only person who was different was Ikki, the man standing in the ring. He shuddered at Yuudai Moroboshi's entire being.

He's a behemoth of an opponent!

Tiger's Bite was a frighteningly powerful ability. It and it alone would likely have been more than enough to conquer the Seven Stars. Even so, the knight that Ikki faced was choosing not to do just that. Instead of indulging in his overwhelming strength, he was attempting to meticulously apprehend Ikki. Every act since he'd first used Astral Trio had been mere foreshadowing.

First, he'd drawn Ikki in by using Astral Trio, following up with the weakness-nullifying Comet. At that point, perhaps Ikki would have thought he had no chance, that the weakness Moroboshi had displayed with Astral Trio was a trap to lure him into Comet, the true killer.

Ikki was also a strong warrior, however. He, a Rank F, had clawed his way up to the Seven Stars. He had quickly perceived that Comet was a mere physical technique, able to be deflected with ease rather than dodged. But in doing so, he had falsely led himself to believe that he had trumped his foe.

Everything had gone exactly according to Moroboshi's plan. Comet wasn't his trump card; it was never intended to be the move that would deal the finishing blow. Its only purpose had been as bait to lure Ikki into a situation where he would consistently strike Tiger King with Intetsu. The entirety of their battle had been for the sake of using Tiger's Bite to exploit his fatal weakness—the fatal weakness present in all Blazers.

With strength like that, pretty much anyone else would be a lot more careless.

He utilized careful strategy to strike at the blind spots in his enemy's consciousness, never falling to sloppiness. If it had taken Ikki even a moment longer to act on his fear that Tiger's Bite could erase Devices in the same way it did Noble Arts, he would have lost both Intetsu and the match in one fell swoop.

"Darn shame. I was so close to devouring that little butter knife of yours."

"Hrk...!"

Moroboshi's panicked look was nowhere to be found. Instead, he smirked fearlessly as he looked down at Ikki, whose shoulder was leaking blood. Between that expression and his overwhelming strength, Ikki became certain of one thing: the man he was fighting,

the Yuudai Moroboshi who seemed so heroic based on his appearance and way of speaking, was actually a chillingly wily opponent. Every one of his actions throughout their battle had served to drive Ikki into a corner, further lowering him into his grave while he had been busy searching for weaknesses. Moroboshi's strategy had accounted for every minute detail.

He seems so far away... There was only about fifteen feet between the two of them, but to Ikki, his opponent was distant and hazy. *So this is what the Seven Stars King is capable of!*



"This is quite the rough development," Alice muttered as the situation in the arena once again became deadlocked. With Moroboshi using Tiger's Bite, Ikki would no longer be able to charge in just by knocking the spear away. His method of overcoming Comet was gone.

Though neither Alice nor Shizuku was aware of Comet's existence, they knew that there was some secret behind Moroboshi's attacks. If they were nothing more than normal stabs, Ikki wouldn't have been having so much trouble avoiding them. Because she knew that, Shizuku could only offer a pained nod in response.

Twice already had the tables been turned when Ikki was just about to seize victory. He had clearly spent more time on the offensive, but Moroboshi still didn't have a scratch on him. It was painfully obvious to everyone present just who was controlling the match.

"I can't believe Big Brother is just being toyed with."

"Are you sure about that?"

A voice of disagreement interrupted Shizuku's complaints. The voice came from a tall, suited woman: Hagun Academy's director, Kurono Shinguuji. She stood next to Shizuku, puffing a cigarette as she questioned the girl's logic.

"Director?"

"Yes, it *looks* like he's wrapped around his opponent's little finger. And really, Moroboshi *has* had the upper hand throughout the fight so far. But things aren't progressing quite the way he'd expected them to. He may seem confident, but I'd bet he's not so calm on the inside."

"What makes you think that?"

"That Tiger's Bite was the culmination of a multitude of traps, something that Moroboshi was betting the whole fight on. It clearly didn't turn out well for him, though, considering that the match isn't over. What Kurogane did was realize that Moroboshi's aim the whole time was his Intetsu, so he used his own body as a shield to protect it. In short, thanks to Ikki's quick wit, the strategy that Moroboshi had

spent the entire match building up is no longer viable.”

With his plan seen through, Moroboshi had lost the element of surprise again. Ikki would not use Intetsu to block Tiger King ever again. In essence, their battle had been reset, the only difference being that Moroboshi was at a disadvantage because he had revealed so many of his tricks.

“Most of all, though,” Kurono continued, “Moroboshi isn’t the only one who can win with smarts instead of strength.”

Ikki could never have heard Kurono’s words, but strangely, he was thinking exactly what she’d just said.

“That’s just what I’d expect from the Seven Stars King. You’re nothing if not full of surprises, Moroboshi.”

“Don’t call it cowardly, now. Clawing for an opening’s the first rule of combat.”

“No way I’d say that. In fact, I’m kind of enjoying this.” Ikki raised his head as he and Moroboshi exchanged words. On his face was an impish grin. “So now it’s my turn to surprise you.”

As a fellow master of physical technique and tactics, Ikki couldn’t let their battle of wits end in defeat. He wouldn’t feel better until he’d gotten the jump on Moroboshi at least once. And he had one method, one strategy in mind that could outwit him and put an end to the match.



“We’ve got some unexpected provocation from Kurogane! Twice has he approached the King, and twice has he been bitten back by the King’s incredible speed, yet this challenger still refuses to fold! He fears nothing!”

“Go, Kurogane! Show ’em how *true* effort wins!”

“You got this, Ikki!”

Cheers arose from the audience, praising Ikki for not shrinking from a fight that had been in his opponent’s favor since the start. Taking no notice of those cheers, however, Moroboshi considered the true meaning behind Ikki’s words.

He’s not one to bluff.

No matter how hard he thought, he couldn’t come up with an explanation. Ikki could no longer knock Comet aside with his sword, as that was tantamount to suicide against Tiger’s Bite, and the same was true for Ittou Shura. For Tiger’s Bite, which could swallow even Ouma’s Kusanagi with ease, Ikki’s magical power was little more than a crumb. Against Moroboshi’s ability to erase magic, a time-limited ability like Ittou Shura was not to be used haphazardly.

Where, then, was Ikki getting his confidence from? Moroboshi couldn’t even begin to imagine it. Even so, it spurred him to widen his

joyous grin.

He sure is an interesting one.

"All right. Surprise me to hell and back, then." Moroboshi would be remiss not to indulge Ikki's willingness to reveal his unimaginable method. In order to be ready for whatever that method was, he relaxed his shoulders and pointed the head of his spear at his foe. "But I'll be real mad if it turns out to be lame. We Osakans hate to be let down."

"Guess you'll just have to wait and see," Ikki said, deeply lowering his hips and readying his feet. "Now then... Here I come!"

Kicking with enough force to break through the concrete floor, he charged toward Moroboshi.

"Kurogane has just started up again, and boy is he fast! He's moving with the same speed he was at the start of this battle! Twice has he used that speed to avoid the King's wrath, and now he's challenging him for a third time! Will he find that the third time's a charm?!"

Iida's voice became shrill with excitement. The crowd also burned with anticipation of what Ikki's challenge would lead to. However,

"Wait. He's fast for sure, but this is...!"

The professional knight Muroto was unsure. Ikki's movements hadn't changed at all; he merely charged straight ahead like a wild boar. In much the same way as Muroto, Moroboshi, too, was disappointed.

Has he still not learned his lesson? Is he really just going with a straightforward charge?

He wasn't even using Ittou Shura. It had already been proven that he couldn't break through Comet with his own strength, and attempting the same suicide attack three times in a row was wholly uninspired.

"I told you, Kurogane, if you let me down, you won't get off easy!" Of course, Moroboshi counterattacked with Comet, the pursuing stab that had already given Ikki so much trouble. "Take a bite, Tiger King! Tiger's Bite!"

With the addition of his magic-breaking ability, Comet took form as an unavoidable, unblockable flash of steel. Ikki attempted to dodge the spearhead with a jump to the right, but that was something he had already tried several times.

Comet would not miss. It changed direction to go to Moroboshi's left, following Ikki as he fled to the side and piercing his neck. In doing so, however, Moroboshi's captured prey disappeared like a mirage.

Huh?!

How could he have just vanished after being dealt a lethal injury? Moroboshi was lost for words at the sight of the incomprehensible situation—at least, up until he noticed that Ikki was at his right side instead of his left, and was stepping into sword range.

Wh-What?!

“A bitter miss for Moroboshi! Somehow, his thrust missed its mark! This is a major failure, perhaps even a fatal one!”

Unbeknownst to the spectators, what happened was not a result of Moroboshi missing, but of Ikki’s outstanding move. Only Shizuku and the others were able to recognize what he’d done, as they had seen the technique before.

“Shizuku, was that—”

“It was! It was the same attack he used against Ayatsuji! That was Shinkirou, I’m certain of it!”

The technique he’d used was, as Shizuku thought, one of Ikki’s seven sword arts: the Fourth Secret Sword, Shinkirou. By carefully adjusting his speed as he charged, Ikki created afterimages of himself, fooling opponents into swinging at thin air. Usually, the afterimages would be in front of and behind himself, but in the case of the Seven Stars King, he used Shinkirou to create them on either side, baiting Comet in the wrong direction.

Dammit! He got me with afterimages!

Moroboshi, however, was still a first-rate student knight. He could instantly analyze what had happened to him and what his opponent had done, then select the optimal counterattack. Using that method, he found that he had no time to sweep or yank back his spear. Given the situation, the best option available to him was to strike with the opposite end of his spear.

His plan still had one major flaw, though: his attack would be too slow. By moving to the weak side of Moroboshi that Comet’s pursuit created, Ikki had completely outwitted him and entered sword range. It was a fatal mistake that not even his best manner of counterattack could save him from.

There was no doubt in Moroboshi’s mind that Ikki’s slash would land first. With no chance of escape, Moroboshi accepted his defeat, which made it all the more shocking for him when, in the next instant, he felt the sensation of the close end of his spear shaft strike Ikki’s cheek and launch him away.

“Oh, wow! What a skillful move from Moroboshi! He recognized his own miss and immediately went for a smack with the base of the spear! With that, he’s repelled Kurogane once again! Kurogane is still unable to keep himself in striking range! A dignified defense by the King!”

Applause showered Moroboshi for having evaded Ikki’s attack a

third time over, yet not a bit of it actually reached his ears.

Tch. That wasn't because of my skill!

He knew that no matter how hard he tried, it should have been impossible for his counterattack to have hit first. The only way it could have happened was if Ikki had made a critical error in the deciding moment.

You gotta be kidding me... Bewilderment shook Moroboshi's heart. He thought back to the events of the night before, the sight of Ikki stopping dead in his tracks before Ouma resurfacing in his mind. *There really is something wrong with him!*

Moroboshi's inference was, unfortunately, right on the mark.



The impact of the spear against Ikki's skull sent an intense shock through his consciousness. In his head, his brain danced wildly as his field of vision muddled. He was far from caring about that in the slightest, however.

Again?!

The mysterious ailment that had lay dormant within him until his battle with Ouma the night before, the inability to move as his mind willed, had resurfaced. It had done so at the worst possible place and time, too, as he had heightened his focus and prepared to topple Moroboshi.

Maybe there is something wrong with me.

"You fought the strongest swordsman in the world and thought nothing about you would change because of it? Even if you remain physically sound, that doesn't mean your heart made it out unscathed."

Damn it, there really is something wrong with me. I am broken!

The terror that was Edelweiss had become a fatal wound without his notice. At the worst possible moment, the imperceptible disease had given him a grim reminder of just what it could do, which sent a cold sweat creeping down his back. Even his friends were able to notice the anomaly within him.

"What's happening? He definitely had the chance to finish the battle, but his movements seemed like they slowed down."

"His movements did slow down," Kiriko said, confirming Alice's suspicion. "Moroboshi's counterattack was fast enough that it's hard to notice, but Ikki definitely decelerated."

"H-He really is nervous, isn't he?"

Kiriko shook her head.

"No, that's not it. If he were nervous, it would have manifested at an earlier stage. Plus, your brother isn't the kind of knight to be dulled by nervousness; he should know how to adjust his actions when he's in poor form. But that may just mean that this is an acute case."

“What do you mean by ‘acute’?! What’s happening to my big brother?”

“At the very least, we can be sure that this isn’t an external wound. My examination can vouch for that. His body is in perfect working order, and the damage he’s taken so far isn’t that severe. Instead, it’s probably his mind that’s encountering some issue. Mental disorders aren’t my area of expertise, so I can’t be too sure about this, but there’s a disorder known as Punch Eye that affects martial artists. It creates an extreme fear of the opponent attacking, causing the body to freeze up. It’s a serious enough condition to end the career of an athlete who’s been forever engraved with that fear.”

“Are you saying he has that?!”

Something abnormal was happening to him, and even Shizuku was likely vaguely aware of it. She was practically screaming as she pressed Kiriko for answers.

“Calm down. Like I said, that’s outside my field; this is all just hypothetical. But we all know he fought that Edelweiss, the strongest knight in the world, and lost.”

Those words turned Shizuku pale, for she knew what they truly meant. Ikki was strong, that much was certain, but he wasn’t strong enough to match the strongest knight alive. In fact, it was strange that he’d managed to return home unharmed.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s been bearing some invisible injury.”

“N-No!”

“You might be right, Kiriko. And even if it’s not this ‘Punch Eye’, it’s just not normal for him to suddenly slow down at that exact moment. You can see it on his face, too.”

Even from afar, Ikki’s turmoil was plain to see—including that he was trying to suppress it and keep a straight face. It was obviously incredibly serious, because it meant that he was so shaken that he couldn’t even keep up appearances.

This isn’t any kind of PTSD like Punch Eye.

Standing silently just outside the circle the three formed, Kurono Shinguuji had a different opinion about the unusual situation. One look at Ikki was all it had taken her to see through to the root of this issue, something indiscernible to even Ikki himself. Or perhaps, rather than seeing through to it, she had anticipated it to some extent.

Ever since she had learned of the conclusion of Ikki’s fight with Edelweiss, she had known that there was the potential for such an issue to arise. Because of that knowledge, she understood that his condition was nothing that threatened his career like Punch Eye would.

That doesn’t change that it’s slowing him down, though. Moroboshi

has probably already figured out that he's having trouble, and if he has, this could turn out very badly.



There was no doubt that the problem that had showed up the night before was rearing its head again. The look on Ikki's face—a look that showed that he was bewildered by a condition even he himself failed to understand—was enough to finally convince Moroboshi of that.

He's trying like hell to stay calm, but that's the same face he made last night, Moroboshi sighed inwardly. In order to convince Koume of his strength, he needed to fight and defeat Another One while he was in perfect condition.

It's too bad, but we're on the field of battle now. When faced with an enemy's weakness, to not exploit it was to disrespect the fight. *Sorry, Kurogane, but you've shown me an opening. For both our sakes, I gotta do everything I can to take it!*

Though he regretted it, Moroboshi could not show mercy or hesitation. He quickly shifted to an offensive stance, ready to finish their match with a single blow.

“Kurogane still seems to be reeling from the damage that last blow dealt. Meanwhile, Moroboshi has taken up the offensive! Another One's back is to the wall—will he be able to pull through?!”

HAGUN ACADEMY BULLETIN

CHARACTER TOPICS

COPYEDITING: KAGAMI KUSAKABE

KIRIKO YAKUSHI

■PROFILE

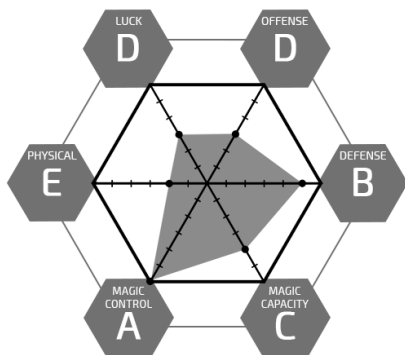
AFFILIATION: RENTEI ACADEMY,
YEAR 3

BLAZER RANK: B

NOBLE ART: LOCAL ANESTHESIA

NICKNAME: MEDICO KNIGHT

SUMMARY: JAPAN'S BEST DOCTOR



KAGAMIN CHECK!

She's a water mage much like Shizuku, but instead of using water as a physical weapon, she uses a tricky style of fighting that infiltrates and manipulates the enemy's body. Though both an able doctor and a powerful knight, Kiriko seems much more committed to being the former, as she hasn't entered even a single Seven Stars until this year. It's only thanks to the tearful pleas of her classmates to do it JUST ONCE that she's finally, reluctantly joined the fray.



“One blow from the base of Moroboshi’s spear has completely changed the course of this battle! Kurogane has definitely slowed down, and Moroboshi is taking full advantage of that, hitting him with even more attacks! This is an appalling scene, folks; there’s been an explosion of bloodshed that’s covered the battlefield! Can we expect the referee to stop this before it gets too painful to bear?!”

Outside the arena where the battle was taking place, in the city that had once been a ghost town, those who couldn’t make it into the Coastal Dome had assembled to watch the events of the Festival on their mobile devices.

“It’s already over,” one such person grumbled. The Worst One’s impending defeat was as clear as day.

“Yeah. Worst One was moving pretty well at the start, but he’s slowed down. It takes him everything he’s got just to run away now.”

“Moroboshi’s really tough, huh?”

“Haha. Well, yeah, what did you expect? You think the Seven Stars King would lose to some Rank F?!”

Those nearby followed up with their own opinions, each one foreseeing Ikki’s defeat. However, there was a single person among the crowd who disagreed with everyone else watching.

“Nope. Ikki’s gonna win.”

“Say what?”

They all turned toward where that voice had come from, insatiably curious as to who would believe such an outcome was possible. Nobody in the area stood out as the speaker of that hopeful thought, but those who strained their eyes caught a glimpse of red hair, fluttering in the wind like a flame as it disappeared into the Dome.

“Huh? Was that... No way!”



Meanwhile, in Hagun Academy’s hospital ward, a TV screen showed Ikki being one-sidedly pushed back.

“Whoa! Kurogane’s finally taken a direct hit! Right in the thigh, too!”

“This doesn’t look good. Worst One just keeps slowing down. Perhaps it’s time for the referee to step in.”

The announcers heralded his defeat, but Touka Toudou, the Raikiri, was left puzzled.

“That’s strange,” she commented with doubt in her voice.

“It certainly is,” Kanata replied. “Why is he suddenly so much slower, I wonder.”

“Hmm. I’m curious about that too, but what’s even stranger is Moroboshi.”

“Oh? Why do you say that?”

“As far as I can tell, Moroboshi has had three sure chances to finish their battle, but he hasn’t taken them.”

“You don’t suppose he’s mocking Kurogane, do you?”

“He’s not the kind of person to do that. But that just makes this even weirder.”

What in the world does Moroboshi see? Touka thought to herself as she looked at Moroboshi’s face on the screen. His actions were very unbecoming of who he was as a fighter. He almost seemed to be afraid of something.

As questions circled in her mind, a major development occurred that coincided with her theory: while Ikki was running away, he fell down.



“Rgh!” Ikki grunted as he hit the floor of the arena.

“Oh no! In his attempt to escape, Kurogane has slipped and fallen in a pool of his own blood! This is Moroboshi’s big chance! Will he end the battle here?!”

With a look of panic on his face, Ikki tried quickly to stand back up, but it was too late. In a battle of giants such as theirs, there would be no recovering from a blunder of that magnitude. Moroboshi would end the fight right then and there.

Or maybe he wouldn’t.

“What’s this?! Moroboshi isn’t going in for the attack! Is he refusing to defeat a fallen opponent?!”

The announcers took his inaction as his way of showing respect for his foe. The audience roared at the sight.

“You go, Boshi! Nothing less from Japan’s strongest!”

“Hurry up and get it over with, though! This is getting tough to watch!”

“Get him, Moroboshiii!”

While his supporters erupted with excitement, Moroboshi was in a cold sweat.

That's five.

Five times he had been handed the chance to finish Ikki off, and five times he had let it slip away. Somehow, even he failed to figure out the reason why.

What is this feeling? It's weird...

The only thing he could figure out was that every time he attacked, every time he pressed Ikki, the pressure emanating from the half-dead knight before him grew ever greater. That pressure made him hesitant to attack at every turn. It felt to him as though taking another step would mean stepping on the tail of a creature more terrifying than any tiger.

Coward! Look at his eyes!

Even assailed by some mysterious ailment, even bloodied from head to toe, the fight in Worst One's eyes didn't waver in the slightest. Those eyes reminded him that he couldn't keep avoiding what he needed to do. If Ikki refused to give up despite facing so much adversity, how could he, the Seven Stars King, give up when he had the advantage?

I can't let Koume see me like this!

As the reigning champion of the Seven Stars Battle Festival and as a brother, he couldn't let that happen. Pride and dignity pushed Moroboshi forward as he lowered his hips more than he had at any point before in their battle.

"Here I come, Kuroganeee!"

With a spirited yell, he set upon Ikki with the intent to finally claim victory.



Moroboshi rushed forward with his greatest speed yet. He unleashed his Astral Trio, aiming for Ikki's brow, throat, and solar plexus—a combination that was certain to put an end to their fight.

There was no way Ikki would be able to evade the attack. On top of being unable to control himself, he also had a thigh injury. Resigning himself to defeat, he reflected upon the bitter feeling it left in his heart.

"Tomorrow, I'll be the greatest opponent you could have ever asked for."

He had been unable to keep his promise. He hated the fact that he couldn't return the favor to his proud foe, who wished wholeheartedly to fight him at full power. For that reason, he swore to himself that he would continue fighting until he was physically unable to. That was the least he could do.

That's why I can't use Ittou Shura. Not yet.

As long as he was dealing with this bizarre condition, using his

time-limited trump card would be putting it to waste. Doing so would nip his chance of victory in the bud, and he couldn't bring himself to do that. Until he fell unconscious, no matter how unsightly it was, he would continue to fight without giving up on even the slightest chance at victory.

With his resolve steeled, Ikki lifted the tip of his sword to meet Moroboshi's attack. Then, riddled with wounds and facing certain defeat, he readied Intetsu. The situation he found himself in brought back a memory, if only for the span of a mere moment.

Come to think of it, this is just like what happened back then.

His desperate battle against Edelweiss at Akatsuki Academy's schoolyard resurfaced in his mind. The situation had been desperate indeed, as he'd been robbed of his vision and left with no time to think. Because of that, the memory of the fight wasn't well-formed, but the similarities between his tattered state against Moroboshi and that of back then helped make his recollection more vivid.

What did I do back then? Surprisingly, the memory of how he'd responded to the approach of the world's strongest knight came back to him with ease. *That's right. I tried to use the swordplay I stole from Edelweiss.*

Edelweiss' swordplay was fast enough that even the afterimages it left behind were impossible to perceive, but fortunately, he had been able to piece it together based on the movements of her body. Her swings were oppressively fast, but Ikki had uncovered the secret behind them: she did not need time to accelerate.

Normally, even regular sword swings were slow when they were started. For the tip of the blade to reach full speed, some measure of acceleration was necessary. However, in none of Edelweiss' movements was there any amount of acceleration. The moment her heel lifted to step forward, her sword was already at top speed. It was an instantaneous stop-and-go, jumping straight from zero to a hundred and back.

Though seemingly useless, it was actually an incredibly strong power. Such extreme changes in speed allowed one to seem many times faster than they actually were, and the lack of a slow start made it extremely difficult for foes to focus on the sword itself. In the space of their battle, Ikki had discerned that much of Edelweiss' fighting abilities.

Using what he'd gleaned from her, he had, in his final moments of consciousness, attempted to replicate her skill using Blade Steal. He'd had no proof that he could imitate it, he'd simply decided that, because it was the strongest sword style he'd ever seen, he should learn to use it. Perhaps, then, attempting to replicate it against

Moroboshi was his best course of action. Though he was too battered to do so properly, there was no doubt that its strength would be of some use to him.

Maybe I can at least...

With that thought in mind, Ikki cast his mind back. He recalled the feeling of fighting Edelweiss, and gave an order to his reluctant body. The world's best swordplay was... was...

"Like this."

Instantly, Ikki became as light as a feather. He weaved through the intervals of Astral Trio like the rushing wind, passing by Moroboshi to deliver a deep horizontal slash to his torso. It was as if his condition had never even affected him; he was moving with speed comparable to that of Ittou Shura.

The intersection between the two fighters happened in the blink of an eye. Before he could figure out what had happened, Moroboshi sank to the ground, unable to muster so much as a scream as blood spewed from his body.

"What the...?" Ikki asked himself. Even he struggled to understand that everything that had just happened was his own doing.

"Wh-Whaaaaat?!"

Shocked by the incomprehensible turnabout, the venue exploded with shouts of confusion.



"Wh-Wh-What in the world just happened?! Just as Moroboshi was about to decide the match, he sank to the ground! He must have been struck by Kurogane, but... I-I'm ashamed to say that it all went too fast for me to see!" Iida yelled, the pitch of his voice rising with every word. The great distance between the announcers' booth and the arena made it hard to follow Ikki's movements—he seemed to disappear from sight and reappear behind Moroboshi, cutting him down in the process. "What does this all mean?! Kurogane's movements were clearly very different!"

Iida couldn't contain his surprise, opening his eyes wide in disbelief. Next to him, however, the Mage-Knight known as Muroto was shocked to a different extent altogether.

"I-Impossible! It can't be, but... No, that's inconceivable!"

He knew exactly where the swordplay and footwork Ikki had just used had come from. Iida almost snapped at him for more information.

"Coach Muroto, do you know something about this?! Could this be the Worst One's legendary Ittou Shura?"

"N-No, that's not Ittou Shura. You can tell that the magic in Kurogane hasn't changed. This is pure swordplay! There are

differences between two-sword and one-sword styles, but that instantaneous acceleration and blinding-fast strike bring to mind something that I've only seen once before!"

"Where have you seen that?! It couldn't have been in the A-League, could it?!"

"You'd never see it in a place like that," Muroto replied while shaking his head. "That style belongs to the worst criminal in all of history. She's the world's strongest knight—so powerful that nations have given up on apprehending her. Kurogane is using the same swordplay as Twin Wings Edelweiss!"

The Dome filled with shouts in response to Muroto's claim, causing the venue to shake it more than it had at any point in the day.

"Say what?!"

"You mean *the* Twin Wings?! But why can Worst One use her swordplay?!"

"Wait! I heard he can steal his enemy's swordplay!"

Everyone in the stands exploded with screams of astonishment and confusion. Ikki's friends as well were, for once, just as dumbfounded as everyone else. They of all people knew that Ikki Kurogane was the kind of person to constantly defy common sense, but if Muroto was correct, then he'd done something far beyond anything he'd done before.

"B-Big Brother really did that?!"

"So he didn't just live to tell the tale, he lived to steal the strongest swordsman's own style?!"

"Th-That can't be!" The one who oppugned Alice's shaken question was Kiriko. She claimed that it was impossible. "If that's true, why didn't he use it from the start?!"

That was the obvious question to ask, but Kurogane responded to it with a denial.

"It's not like he chose not to. Until just now, he simply couldn't remember it."

"Ah!" Kiriko squeaked as she recalled the conversation Ikki had had with Yagokoro the night before.

"The fact that he didn't remember served as the cause of his condition, too."

"Mind explaining what you mean, Director?"

"Edelweiss' swordplay is abnormal. Normally, a human's movements are the result of muscles working in unison, but her style doesn't work like that. To instantly go from zero to a hundred percent, you have to move all of those muscles at exactly the same time, condensing all of your muscular strength in an instant. That said, the brain can't fire off enough electrical impulses to command all of those

muscles at once. So, to make it possible, you have to change your brain's very signaling."

One had to create signals that were wholly different from those created by a normal human. Such so-called "battle signals" were shorter, yet denser with information. Without using those to their fullest extent, the intricate machine known as the human muscular system could not be put into simultaneous full-power operation.

"In their high-speed, blink-and-it's-over battle, Kurogane acquired these when he was struck by Edelweiss' blades. Even though he couldn't retrieve the memories, his brain still retained them. And for a swordsman at Ikki's level, once they took in such an incredible technique, they would unconsciously begin to reproduce it.

"In other words, when his battle against Moroboshi reached a decisive point and Kurogane's concentration was at its limit, his brain used those battle signals. But much like Kurogane himself, his body had forgotten them, unable to understand the strange, different impulses."

"And because of that, his body couldn't respond in kind. Is that what you're saying?"

Shizuku's confirmation was met with a nod from Kurono.

"Right. Basically, Kurogane wasn't broken by Edelweiss. It was quite the opposite: that battle forced him to evolve tremendously, to the point that not even his muscles could keep up. At least, not until just now."

On the verge of defeat, Ikki's body had finally grown to accept the power he had acquired. In doing so, he created a new way of moving that differed entirely from how he had done it in his sixteen long years.

"His brain—an engine idling at super-high speed—and his muscles—the clutch—have finally connected. At this point, the end of the match is nigh. Yuudai Moroboshi may be the strongest Seven Stars King in the last ten years, but this opponent is just too much for him. It doesn't matter that Kurogane lost to the world's strongest swordsman; his life-and-death battle with her and his ability to learn have combined perfectly, giving him skill that eclipses that of all other student knights. He has become far stronger than necessary for being in this tournament. The boy standing in front of Moroboshi right now is truly a beast."

Perhaps, Kurono thought, the one who had an unlucky first-round matchup was actually Moroboshi.



"Gahah...!"

Moroboshi was awoken by a cold sensation on his face: the stone

of the arena floor.

Wha—? Why am I on the ground? With his consciousness having been so suddenly seized from him, he had no idea what was going on—not the situation he was in, or even that he had taken a blow from Ikki. *Anyway, I'd better stand up.*

It was a fighter's instinct to quickly rise from a defenseless, prone position. Even if he didn't know what had happened, his action was a reflexive one. Hence, as soon as Moroboshi awoke, he jumped to his feet.

"Gnaaaaagh!"

He instantly screamed in pain, however, as if a smoldering chunk of iron had been pressed into his side.

"Moroboshi stands up, but he appears to have taken some serious damage! He's bleeding quite a bit, too! Both of his knees are buckling!"

Once he'd heard the play-by-play announcer's voice and experienced the pain in his side, Moroboshi finally realized that he was wounded.

What the heck? I got hit?! But I didn't see anything!

Moroboshi was confused, but then he heard something.

"I finally got it..." his opponent murmured.

"Kurogane? What the hell did you do?"

What realization could he have made that led to such speed? In response to this question, Ikki bowed in apology.

"Moroboshi, I'm sorry for making you wait so long."

"You're sorry?"

"Yeah. But now, it's all here." Ikki was clearly speaking of the promise he'd made the day before—the promise that he would be the greatest opponent Yuudai Moroboshi could have asked for. He was finally convinced that he could carry out that promise. "I can do what I promised now. I'll show you the true, full strength of Ikki Kurogane!"

"...Nh!"

As he spoke that last word, Ikki vanished from Moroboshi's field of vision.

He disappeared?!

It was not that he'd disappeared, Moroboshi's kinetic vision simply couldn't keep up with the rocketing start he'd taken, reaching top speed the moment his heel had left the ground. He traced a smooth curve as he darted around Moroboshi to the left, easily slipping through the thrice-striking spear to arrive in sword range.

"Rahhhh!"

Dashing by like a black blur, Ikki let loose a hail of sword strikes. The attacks tore open Moroboshi's right side, but he still turned deftly and counterattacked.

“Damn youuu!”

Judging Ikki’s position by the burning pain that assailed him, Moroboshi unleashed an Astral Trio. However, all three strikes struck nothing but air, for Ikki was no longer in the direction he was aiming.

H-He’s already out of the way?!

He was flabbergasted by Ikki’s speed. However, he was given no time to be surprised as a slash quickly fell on him from behind.

“Gaaah!”

“Wow, he’s taken another blow! Moroboshi keeps on letting his opponent into striking range! He can’t keep up with Kurogane’s moves! Astral Trio whiffs again, sailing through the air without reaching its destination!”

“There’s nothing he can do! Kurogane’s smooth movement and overwhelming speed are making it hard for even us to keep up with him from up in the booth! Following him when he’s right in front of you must be impossible! I doubt the Seven Stars King can see Worst One anymore!”

Muroto’s analysis was right on the mark.

Dammit...!

An unbelievable scene had unfolded in Moroboshi’s field of vision. Countless sword strikes assailed him, the sound of footsteps moving with incredible speed were audible—there was no doubt that his foe was right next to him, but no matter where he turned to look, he saw nothing. The arena seemed empty apart from him.

What the—? What on earth?!

Was it really possible? Was what Ikki was doing actually, realistically possible? In a flat, circular arena of just over a hundred yards in diameter and with no hiding spots to speak of, how could Moroboshi have been unable to see his foe, who was so close that he could hear him breathing?

Th-This is real bad!

Moroboshi sensed the signs of another impending slice. Continuing to get hit would spell his end, but with such a wide gap in speed, defending himself with his spear was nigh impossible. The decision he made, then, was to cross his arms as an emergency guard.

“Hraaahhhhh!”

He stopped pouring magic into his spear, forgoing the use of Tiger’s Bite, and unleashed it from his body to create and envelop himself in armor.

“Look at the Seven Stars King now! The strongest, proudest knight in all of Japan has abandoned pride and glory for a full-on defense!”

Moroboshi’s magic was not as great as Stella’s. Because of that, he was unable to nullify other Devices like she could—not even one

belonging to a Rank F. But if he released all of his magic, he could at least weaken Intetsu's slashes to the point that they were little more than light whacks. If he used his arms to protect his head, he should survive at least one or two blows, but that meant going entirely on the defensive, abandoning the idea of attacking altogether. It gave Ikki the chance to step in and attack without fear.

"Kurogane won't let this chance go! Running like the wind, he's striking from all directions at once! He's beating the tar out of Moroboshi, and the King can't handle it! Is he losing the will to fight?!"

"That's not it. The Seven Stars King has completely lost sight of Worst One. The only thing he can do is tighten up and get through this. He's doing everything in his power to survive right now!" Muroto praised Moroboshi's spirit in not giving up no matter what may come. "But still, we should end this fight!"

"What?! Are you saying Moroboshi doesn't have a chance to turn the tables?!"

"It's impossible," Muroto responded with a nod. "The difference in their skill is too great. He doesn't stand a chance!"

Muroto was a Mage-Knight distinguished in Japan, having climbed his way up to the KoK A-League. He of all people knew that the gap in skill was too vast for Moroboshi to surmount. However, his analysis angered Moroboshi's fans.

"What's with this stupid analyst?!"

"Boshiii! Don't you dare give up!"

His hometown supporters screamed in pain. However, the battle's sudden momentum shift was followed by an unbelievably one-sided match.

"With every gale of dark wind, the magical armor protecting Moroboshi is chipped away even more, breaking down until it eventually shatters! Is this how it ends?! Will the Star of Naniwa, the conqueror of last year's tournament and hopeful for the first-ever two-year streak, lose here, unable to fight back?!"

In the very center of the crucible of excitement and confusion created by the fourth matchup in the first round's block C and all its unimaginable developments, Shizuku noticed Koume's tiny form leaving the venue in her periphery. It looked as if she was fleeing.

Koume...

She wore a strange expression as she ran. It reminded Shizuku not only of her expression while watching the battle, but also of that from when she'd seen Ikki the day before. At those times, too, her face had been distorted by the pain she suppressed.

Shizuku had a good understanding of how Koume felt, as she also had a brother who lived for battle. Along with this came an

understanding of why she was tormented, and the knowledge of her logical mistake. Before she knew it, Shizuku's legs carried her into a run after Koume.

"Oh, Shizuku. I've always said that's what I love most about you," Alice muttered to herself.

Hearing her friend's guess as to why she was acting as such, Shizuku's ears took on a light shade of red.



The perimeter of the Dome was separated from each section of the stands by a single fire escape door. Near one such door, on a bench next to a gently curving window that commanded a wide view of Osaka Bay, sat Koume Moroboshi. Her back was turned away from the venue where her brother Yuudai fought.

You don't have to do this anymore, Yuu.

She just wanted him to stop. If he was doing it all for her, then there was no longer any point. He had never told her that he was fighting to get her to speak again, but she'd never needed his direct confirmation. That made it all the more painful, all the more difficult for her to watch. She couldn't stand to watch as her brother shed blood because of her, so she ran away.

"You're not going to watch the match?"

The one who spoke to her was Shizuku, who had followed her from the stands. In her surprise, Koume whirled around to face the person who'd asked her the question. Her eyes stopped on the girl of almost exactly the same height as her, who she remembered was the sister of her brother's opponent.

Oh, she was at the restaurant yesterday. I think...

Why would she have left the stands? Her brother was only moments away from seizing victory over Koume's own. Shizuku seemed to read Koume's mind through her puzzled expression, as she smiled a bit worriedly and explained why she came.

"I just couldn't let you go. As a girl who also has a big brother, I kind of know a lot about how you feel."

"...!"

Koume's eyes went wide with confusion as she stared at Shizuku.

"Kiriko told us why your brother revived his career," Shizuku said as she sat down next to Koume, who seemed to accept her explanation. It only made sense that Kiriko knew all about the Moroboshi siblings. "I understand just how you feel, because I also love my brother very much. Seeing him hurt, seeing him shed blood, it's all so difficult. And if it was all for me, I'd feel like my heart was breaking all the time."

"..."

Shizuku's words described Koume's frame of mind aptly. With no reason to hide anything given how much Shizuku already knew, Koume nodded slightly in her silence.

"You'd probably think that if this is all for you, then he should just stop."

Another nod.

"It's so hard to be a burden on the man you love."

Yet another nod...

"...?!"

...before realizing that her new friend had said something insane. Koume's face turned a deep red as she shook her head vigorously in refutation. She and her brother were nothing like that.

"Oh, no? You don't love him like that? I see..."

Why is she so disappointed?

Koume was a little perplexed by her unusual form of love.

"Well, even if your relationship is different, it must still be uncomfortable to watch and cheer for your own brother like it's not your business that he's fighting to help you speak again."

"..."

Shizuku's slow, almost soothing speech seemed to put Koume's innermost feelings on display. Indeed, even she wanted to support her brother. And she did, long ago. So long ago that he was in the Little League at the time. She always sat in the front row, screaming as hard as her little vocal cords would let her. Her brother was so much stronger and cooler than anyone else. She loved supporting him—it was fun. But things had changed.

After the accident, nothing was the same. Moroboshi began fighting only to get her to speak again, as if it was his duty as an older brother. How could she support him in that? No matter how much time had passed, she would never be worthy of supporting someone who sacrificed so much of himself for her.

The question of how long she planned to lean on her brother nagged at her endlessly. Thus, ever since the accident, she had never been able to give her brother her heartfelt support. It had even gone so far as to culminate in her turning tail and fleeing from the arena.

She knows all of that.

It was somewhat embarrassing for Koume, but she felt a measure of kindness in Shizuku, who understood her so well and spoke in such a soothing way to her. She took out her cell phone and tried to type a "thank you" to Shizuku, but Shizuku spoke once more before she could.

"But who cares? There's no point in you worrying about that."

"...?!"

Koume stopped cold, so shocked by those words that she turned her attention back to Shizuku's face. That girl had just revealed the inner workings of her mind and torn it all apart. Of course, Shizuku also had her reasons for saying such a thing.

"Who cares, you know? No matter how much you—no, no matter how much *we* rely on them, that's what we're supposed to do. We're their little sisters, and they're our big brothers."

"...!"

A big brother protected his younger siblings, and younger siblings depended on their big brother. That didn't only apply to humans, either; it was a convention followed by many living things. If others could do it, then they had that right as well.

"Even if nobody else will be nice to you, your big brother is the one rock that you can always rely on. That's why I keep relying on mine, and why I will never stop loving him. Even if he loves someone else, and even if it bothers him that I love him, I can't let myself stop. Compared to how selfish I am, your selfish desire to cheer your brother on—well, even if you can't literally cheer him on—is microscopic."

That was the reason behind not just Shizuku's words, but also her coming to find Koume. She couldn't bear to watch as the girl was crushed under the weight of her guilt just because she didn't believe she could rely on her brother. She'd said everything she wanted to say, and just as she finished saying it, there was a great clamor in the venue behind them.

"Kurogane's just turned up the heat again! Faster, faster, he keeps on carving off more and more of Moroboshi's magic guard! It's only a matter of time before he breaks through!"

"Looks like the battle's about to end. I should get back in there," Shizuku said, standing up from the bench. "What are you going to do? Or rather, what do you *want* to do?"

"..."

The question again perplexed Koume. It wasn't that she didn't understand what Shizuku had told her, but after getting her brother into an accident and making him worry by not talking, could she really continue to rely on him? She couldn't so readily abandon such a long-held doubt, so she merely sat on that bench, unsure of what to do.

"And there it is! Moroboshi's magical guard has finally worn off! He's truly backed into a corner now!"

Yuu!

Despite her fear, despite her worries, she chose to see her brother, and let her legs carry her to him.



In the arena, the match was all but decided.

“Moroboshi jumps back to make some dis— Ah! Kurogane expected this! Moroboshi can’t escape! A desperate Astral Trio toward the impending predator, but it misses! Kurogane’s advance is much faster than even the speed of Moroboshi’s spear! Three hits, now four, he’s just taking more damage! Blood erupts onto the white arena floor! All of Kurogane’s swings are landing, but Moroboshi refuses to give in!

“Moroboshi’s army of supporters has been silenced by this one-sided beatdown! I’m sorry to say it, but it’s hard to imagine Moroboshi coming back from this! The difference in strength and skill is just too much!”

Having exhausted his protective magic and been left without power to activate Tiger’s Bite, Moroboshi frantically stabbed in an attempt to fight back. Unfortunately, however, he could hardly even perceive Ikki’s shadow. He had no hope of sinking his fangs into the enemy in his condition. His spear vainly pierced the air, helplessly taking the full force of blow after blow.

It couldn’t even be called a fight. Anyone could tell that Moroboshi was to lose. Even so, he refused to bend, never giving up on victory.

“The Seven Stars King refuses to fall! Yuudai Moroboshi stands guard in the center of the arenaaa!”

I can’t lose now!

Was it for Koume? No. At first, yes, it had all been because of his sense of duty as her brother. Koume had become mute as a result of his weakness, in a way, so he had decided that it was up to him to bring her speech back, but ever since he’d stepped into the arena, there had been a shift in his way of thinking.

He had finally remembered just how much he loved the world of battle. It made him hope so very strongly, more than ever before, that his beloved sister didn’t just recover, but also that she would support him. With him fighting and Koume cheering him on, the two could share in the joys of his knighthood, just like they had in the good old days. Maybe it wasn’t a very manly desire...

...But it’s the most important thing to me.

Until his dream came true, he would keep being the strong brother that Koume could cheer for from the bottom of her heart. That pride served as an endless fount of fighting spirit for the boy known as Yuudai Moroboshi.

“What’s wrong, Kurogane?!” he shouted. “I’m still standing! Bring it ooon!”



“He’s got an incredibly strong will, doesn’t he? Still not giving up...”

Covered in blood and almost literally without a leg to stand on, Moroboshi’s attitude as he continued to challenge Ikki filled Shizuku’s voice with fear. His instinct for battle was terrifying—so much so that even Kurono had to nod in agreement.

“That’s the unwavering spirit of a boy who recovered from career-ending injuries. It might as well be impossible to break him. But still, his body has a limit. He’s out of magic and has lost his Tiger’s Bite; he’s just provoking Ikki because he can’t move his own legs. There’s nothing to fear about Moroboshi anymore, and Ikki knows that. I’m sure he’ll go for the kill next.”

The situation in the arena then developed exactly according to Kurono’s prediction. A blue aura of magic had begun to radiate from Ikki like flames that enveloped him. It was his way of declaring that he was ready to end this fight.

“Here comes Ittou Shura for the overkiill! He’s finally played the trump card that’s felled The Hunter, Raikiri, the Crimson Princess, and plenty of other powerful warriors!”

“Worst One is a frighteningly wily fighter! He uses his most effective abilities at the most effective times! The Seven Stars King is already having trouble keeping up with him. With this, his chance of victory falls to basically zero!”

Muroto was right. If Moroboshi hadn’t been able to respond to Ikki’s sword swings even without the boost from Ittou Shura, how could he fight back after that physical capability had been multiplied by dozens? Ikki’s one technique had secured his victory.

“I’ll use my greatest weakness to topple you, Seven Stars King. Let’s do this, Moroboshi!”

He assumed his final attacking position—the one that would end their long fight. In a mere instant, Ikki had dug down and put all of his strength into his legs to kick off. His heel lifted, propelling him toward Moroboshi at maximum speed. It was almost as if he were flying.

“Kurogane’s off to win! The Seven Stars King is in critical peril!”

As if their battle had reached its true climax, Iida’s voice was the loudest it had been all day. The enormous crowd’s anticipation boiled over with the thought that the King was going to fall in the first round.

Amid the excitement and screams that shook the ground, Koume finally remembered what her nearly broken brother had told her as he’d left that morning.

“Hey. Mind writing ‘Go get ’em!’ like you always do?”

Right.

It wasn't just her who wanted to support him. Her brother, too, wanted her to support him the way she had in times past. How had she responded to his little request? She wrote her usual words of support on a piece of paper and handed it to him. Was that wrong? What he wanted wasn't a scrap of paper. What he wanted was...

“What are you going to do? Or rather, what do you want to do?”

What I really wanted to say was...

“You ’an ’o it, Yuuuu!”



A scream burst from her heart as the words she had wanted for so long to say—as the words she thought she wasn’t allowed to say, because she’d stolen her brother’s reason for living. Her vocal cords, dried and seemingly rusty from years of disuse, failed to perfectly form the words. Her voice was quiet and hoarse.

Ah...

However, even from the center of the earth-shaking voices of the audience, Yuudai heard her words. There was no way he wouldn’t after having waited so many years to hear that voice.

“I got thiiiiis!” As Moroboshi’s roar thundered through the venue, his next action astonished every single person there. He wrung the last bit of strength from his near-dead body and, aiming for the brow of the Ittou Shura-enhanced, full-speed-charging Ikki, threw his Device. “Drill into him, Tiger Kiiing!”

All throughout the match, Moroboshi had done battle from within spear range. However, in a last-ditch effort to win, he threw his spear at his opponent—the first long-range attack of the battle.

“This is bad!” The eleventh-hour anomaly caused Kuroto to raise her voice in surprise.

What was bad about it? The throw was certainly unexpected—even if an attack directed at the blind spot in the enemy’s consciousness was very like Moroboshi—but a long-ranged spear throw would never hit a knight at Ikki’s level. At least, not normally. In that moment, though, things were different.

The strength of Edelweiss’ swordplay lies in its ability to stop and go at will. But at the same time, that makes it impossible to suddenly move slower or change directions!

When using her fighting style, movement was essentially always in overdrive. The strongest swordplay in the world was unparalleled while attacking, but as a result of that, it was especially fragile in sudden changes of circumstances such as ambushes.

Worse yet, Ikki was also under the effects of Ittou Shura. That alone provided him with such speed that he would have trouble with sudden stops or changes in speed; coupling that with Edelweiss’ techniques put him in a very precarious position.

For this second and this second only, a spear throw turns from ineffective to the ultimate counterattack against Kurogane!

The only way he could stop it from hitting him was by cutting it away with his sword, but even that was infeasible, for the soaring Tiger King was enveloped in a golden gleam—the light of Tiger’s Bite.

Moroboshi’s magic should have dried up, so how could he have used Tiger’s Bite? The answer lay in Tiger King itself: half of its shaft was missing. By breaking apart the lump of magic that was his Device, Moroboshi had wrung out enough magic for one use of his Noble Art.

In short, Ikki could neither dodge nor parry the thrown spear.

Moroboshi must have been aiming to make this happen!

Indeed, Moroboshi had quickly discovered the biggest weakness in Edelweiss' swordplay. From that moment on, he had been setting his trap, luring Ikki into using Ittou Shura and attacking at speeds even he himself could not control. He had used his own muscle, blood, and soul to sell the idea that even he was unable to stand up to Ikki's sudden change. Using what could be called a "bloodstained bluff", he had fooled every single person in the Dome—the spectators, Ikki, and even the Rank A Mage-Knight Kurono.

Kurogane's already at full speed! He can't evade the throw! she thought, shuddering at Moroboshi's immeasurably high level of battle sense, which had subverted even her expectations. Alice and Shizuku next to her were much the same.

Then he was just making a fool of everyone at the venue?!

So this is how the King really fights!

The two of them were made fully aware of the true strength of the best in Japan, he who had earned the title of Seven Stars King. But in the next instant, every spectator was frozen by further shock. Just as the pouncing Tiger King's head was to pierce through Ikki's brow, he disappeared like a mirage.

What?!

Moroboshi was stunned as a shadow appeared over his head. He looked up to find a dark swordsman swinging his blade downward, the sun at his back. It was Shinkirou, the same sword art that Worst One had used to evade Comet, but instead of using it forward and backward or left and right, he was using it up and down.

Leaving afterimages on the ground, he used his strengthened legs to leap. Moroboshi's spear had only ever flown toward an illusion, as Ikki had known that Moroboshi would use this moment to bare his fangs. How he had come to know that was made clear the moment Moroboshi saw his assailant's expression.

Oh, so that's it. His face showed no feelings of vanity for having caught Moroboshi in his own trap. Instead, there was only immense respect—enough to make even Moroboshi blush. *You really believed in me, huh?*

He, the Seven Stars King, had put Ikki through the wringer with trap after trap. Someone like him wouldn't easily fall for his own conniving, Ikki believed, and in the end, that belief became the reason for Moroboshi's imminent loss. More than anyone else present, more than even Yuudai himself, Ikki respected the knight he fought. Ikki had so much respect for Moroboshi that even when his bloodstained bluff had fooled everyone else, it had not fooled him.

It was then that the victor was decided. Utilizing the force of his descent, Ikki swung his sword. Moroboshi, who had bet everything on his ambush, had neither his weapon nor his magic nor even the stamina to flee. Intetsu cut a gash into him diagonally from shoulder to hip, sending fresh blood flying through the air and causing both of his knees to buckle.

In the midst of the slash, Moroboshi squeezed out the last of his strength to reach out and grab Ikki's shoulders. Then, to the knight who surpassed him and the foe who had believed in his strength to the last, he entrusted a wish:

"Don't lose, man."

Finally, Yuudai Moroboshi, the Seven Stars King, collapsed. The referee signaled that the match was over, and that at long last, a victor had emerged.



"And we have a winneeeeeer! With twists everywhere you looked, the fourth match of block C was a breathless roller coaster! Another One, Ikki Kurogane, comes out on top of this struggle! It's unprecedented! The Seven Stars King, a favorite to win two years in a row, has been bested in the first round! What an incredible upset!"

As soon as the match ended, a medical team rushed into the ring and loaded Moroboshi onto a stretcher. His energy completely exhausted, Moroboshi didn't even have the strength to leave the arena on his own two legs. As he was rushed out of the arena, his supporters sent him off with applause.

"Good job! You did your best, Boshi, you really did!"

"We've cheered for you ever since before your retirement... but today was your best showing ever!"

"Applause rains down on the hometown hero as he's carried away, unconscious, on a stretcher. This is the boy who recovered from career-ending injuries; an incredible warrior who stood at the top undefeated until today. Even though he lost, the unwavering grit he showed in that glorious performance was more than fitting for the strongest student knight in Japan, and stands as a testament to his Seven Stars King title!"

Off to the side, Ikki watched as Moroboshi was carted off the field.

"Yeah, don't worry. I won't lose," he said confidently, answering Moroboshi's last request before turning to leave the arena.

"And now, after taking down the conqueror of the Seven Stars, Another One leaves the ring with his usual composure as he looks onward to the second round. The weakest magic meets the strongest swordplay. His reputation is well-earned, and everyone here today can

be completely sure of that. This boy is the real deal! He's not just some Rank F, he's a knight strong enough to compete with the greats for the top of the sixty-second Seven Stars Battle Festival!"

"That was sooo cool! Go, Tokyo guy!"

"Ikki's the best!"

"Keep up this momentum and take the top! You can do it!"

Like Moroboshi, Ikki was subject to a rain of applause as he left.

Thank you.

Though he was a little embarrassed to be getting so much attention, he silently offered his heartfelt gratitude to everyone in the Dome as he returned to the gate he'd entered through. Due to the effects of Ittou Shura and his use of an unfamiliar style of swordplay, his steps were heavy with fatigue. However, his back remained perfectly straight, for he was proud of himself for winning against such a powerful knight.

It was a worrying match, to say the least. When he'd left the waiting room to enter the arena, he couldn't bear the fear he'd felt. But he had won and made it to the next round, making it through the first tribulation of Seven Stars, leaving only four more. Only four more wins, and he would finally be at the place he'd always admired, the place he'd always aspired to reach.

The peak of the Seven Stars isn't too far now!

Ikki came to that realization as he made his way through the gate and exited the arena. Then, from within that gate, a lone figure was visible, clapping as they walked toward him.

"So, you really won." The path between the waiting room and the gate wasn't illuminated, so the area they were in was pitch-black. Thus, as the person speaking to him was still far off, Ikki had trouble seeing their face. He had no need to see their face, however, for hearing their voice was more than enough to tell him who it was. "But of course you did. After all, I'm the only one who gets to take down Another One."

Approaching him was a girl with eyes as beautiful as rubies, and scarlet hair like flames to match: Stella Vermillion, the Crimson Princess.

HAGUN ACADEMY BULLETIN

CHARACTER TOPICS

COPYEDITING: KAGAMI KUSAKABE

YUUDAI MOROBOSHI

■PROFILE

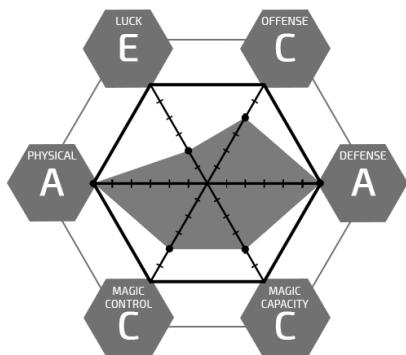
AFFILIATION: BUKYOKU ACADEMY,
YEAR 3

BLAZER RANK: B

NOBLE ART: TIGER'S BITE

NICKNAME: SEVEN STARS KING

SUMMARY: WINNER OF LAST
YEAR'S SEVEN STARS



KAGAMIN CHECK!

The Seven Stars King needs no introduction. His Noble Art, Tiger's Bite, has the incredible ability to chomp away magic, making other Blazers easy prey. Between his powerful Art and superior skill with the lance, he's a cunning fighter who secures victory using elaborate, roundabout methods. He attacks an opponent from the blind spots in their consciousness, just like how a prowling tiger waits for the perfect moment to sink its fangs into the jugular.



Ikki Kurogane took down Seven Stars King Yuudai Moroboshi and secured his spot in the second round of the Seven Stars Battle Festival. Waiting at the gate to congratulate him was his girlfriend, Crimson Princess Stella Vermillion, who had not yet shown herself due to a delay on the bullet train.

“Th-That’s the Crimson Princess! Stella Vermillion has finally arrived at the venue!”

“Ooh, it’s true! That’s the real-deal princess!”

“Her hair really is bright-red. It’s beautiful.”

“She’s got some serious legs!”

People cheered for and fawned over the redhead who emerged from the gate—the fanfare was much akin to even Moroboshi’s entrance. It was more or less the expected level of attention a Rank A would get, but there was no doubt that the person happiest to see her was Ikki Kurogane himself.

“Stella... I’m so glad you’re here. It’s great to see you.”

He was overjoyed not only because she’d made it in time, but also because it had been so long since they’d last seen each other. His heart and wounds alike throbbed with heat as he once again came to the realization of just how much he loved Stella.

“I really wanted to get here in time, but rocks were blocking the tracks and it took a while to get rid of all of them. They should totally put drills on the fronts of bullet trains. That’d look cool, too.”

“Haha. Sounds like a real disaster.”

But how did they get rid of them? Could they have done it through pure manpower? Nah, I’d better not ask about the details.

“That was quite the opponent you fought, though. I only saw the end of your match, but that was more than enough to tell me everything.”

“He sure was... But I won. Now it’s your turn.”

“Yeah, I know,” Stella responded promptly. Flames of confidence burned in her eyes. The pained look that Touka had seen before she fell into a coma, the look of a girl whose confidence had been shattered to bits, was long gone. It was clear that Ms. Saikyou’s

training had gotten her the results she'd craved.

That's great.

As the deeply relieved Ikki thought that, Stella passed by him and stood in front of the crowd of spectators.

"I apologize for my lateness!" she announced to everyone in the Dome. "But I, Stella Vermillion, have arrived!"

"Stella has apologized for her tardiness with a cheerful tone of voice. I like how respectful she is."

"But now that she's here, when will her delayed match be held?"

"Well, the committee is working to figure that out as we speak. I expect we'll see it either at the very end of the day, or possibly even as our next battle, seeing as block C's matches have just wrapped up. Ah, and speak of the devil. I've just received word that their discussion has ended. Everyone, the management committee has an announcement regarding block B's delayed match. Please take a look at the screen."

Prompted by Iida's announcement, the spectators all turned their attention to the Dome's massive screen. On it, a bald-headed man was visible.

"Oh, it's Kaieda!"

"It really is! It's Yuuzou Kaieda, the Judgment's Thunderbolt!"

Many spectators—mostly those over age forty—were excited by his appearance. They had every reason to be, as Judgment's Thunderbolt was a hero who had participated in the King of Knights A-League back in their generation. After he retired, the hero was put in charge of the Seven Stars Battle Festival's management committee. As their representative, it was his job to announce the results of their deliberation.

"Hello there to spectators and contestants alike. I'm Kaieda, the head of the Seven Stars Battle Festival's management committee. The committee has been discussing when Stella Vermillion's delayed match will be rescheduled to, and I am here now to announce the results. The fourth match of block B is going to be the very next match."

The result was just as Iida had hypothesized moments before. The committee had unanimously voted that, as block C's matches had just ended, holding it before the next block began was as good a time as any. All he had left to do was to confirm the time with the competitors themselves.

"Stella, do you have any issues with this?"

"No, sir. I don't mind," she answered quickly. It was her who had arrived late, after all; she had no intention of objecting to whatever decision was made. Someone in the crowd, however, had a complaint to air.

"I have a *major* issue with it," the icy voice said, assailing every

set of ears despite the ruckus coming from the crowd. There was only one person a voice like that—a voice so contrasting of the clarity of Stella’s—could have belonged to, and sure enough, Mikoto Tsuruya, the ash-blond girl known as Icy Sneer, jumped down more than thirty feet from the audience to land silently on the artificial turf that surrounded the ring. “Sir, I find it strange that you would discuss all of this and exclude me entirely.”

“But of course, we did intend to confirm things with you. If you have an issue, does that mean having yours be the next match is inconvenient for you? If so, we’re more than willing to move it to the end of the day. This delay is not due to any mistake made by you, so the management committee is ready to adapt to your circumstances.”

Tsuruya shook her head in response to him, seemingly annoyed at his lack of understanding. Her objection had nothing to do with when the match would take place.

“I have no problem with it being the next match. What I find it hard to accept is that you’re not going to punish her for being late. I demand a fitting penalty for Stella’s actions leading to this delay,” she urged the committee, pointing a finger at Stella.

“Hey, what the hell?”

“That’s not chivalrous at all! Fight fair and square!”

The crowd was the first to show their disapproval. None of them wanted to see a battle with a handicap attached; they wanted a match in which two young knights fought each other with all their might. Some did agree with Tsuruya, voicing complaints such as, “Mikoto’s right, you know”, and “Yeah! It’s Stella’s fault for being late! She oughta pay a price for it!”, but the majority were against letting Stella be penalized.

Despite that, Tsuruya was unmoved. Her assertion remained, just like the trademark icy sneer on her face.

Hmph. Heckle me all you want, but I’m not going to budge on this.

The Crimson Princess wasn’t a foe she had any chance of beating in a normal fight, so Tsuruya was ready to take any and every advantage she could get. No matter how much people hated her, all she needed was to win—in her eyes, a knight’s worth was decided by victory alone. She knew the essence of what it meant to be a knight, so in a way, she was similar to Ikki and Moroboshi. Regardless, though, her assertion had little chance of success.

“Hmm. Well, yes, there is precedent for penalizing people who are late to the tournament. However, that is limited to unexplained tardiness and for actions with wicked intent. We were able to confirm the disruption of her train due to fallen rocks, so the management committee sees no need to penalize her this time. Rather, we find that holding her match as the very first one after her arrival is more than

enough of a penalty.”

“Rgh!”

Tsuruya had guessed as much, but the committee had already inquired into whether or not a penalty would be needed. However, after scouring past precedents, they had arrived at the decision to not do so. Tsuruya’s demand had failed.

“No. It’s nowhere near enough.”

It should have failed, at least, if not for Stella Vermillion of all people seeking out her own punishment.

“S-Stella?!”

Ikki, who was still next to her at the time, went wide-eyed at her sudden demand. But Stella took no notice of this, continuing to speak to the committee head.

“Icy Sneer’s demands are perfectly fair. After all, if I had come two days ago like the other contestants, I wouldn’t have been delayed by the incident with the rocks. That was entirely my fault, and I believe punishment is in order.”

Much like Ikki, the crowd and the committee were also rendered completely speechless. At the Seven Stars, where one slip-up could result in elimination, it was incredibly bizarre for someone to put themselves at a disadvantage.

“W-Well, this is a surprise. I didn’t expect that to come from *your* mouth.”

Stella nodded in full agreement with Kaieda’s shock.

“Even if Tsuruya hadn’t said anything about the penalty, I was planning to bring it up myself. The Vermillion royal family emphasizes fairness and sincerity; I would never have thought of trying to escape punishment.”

“Mmm. I see.”

“As such, I have a proposal regarding the next match.”

“Do you, now? Then by all means, tell us your proposal.”

“It would be unfair to Tsuruya if we were to fight the next match without making some sort of change to the rules. So, for my battle with her, I would like to use a special rule set that gives her a handicap against me. In concrete terms, I’d like to make our match a four-against-one: Tsuruya and the three winners of block B versus me, all at once.”

“Wh-What?!”

Kaieda’s throat was hoarse as he gasped in shock at Stella’s absurd rule change suggestion. And of course, he wasn’t the only one.

“Whoa! The princess has gone totally crazy!”

“It’s a penalty, not flagellation!”

Everyone in the crowd began shouting their thoughts on the matter. Many were unsure that they had heard her correctly.

“A-Are you serious right now?!” Tsuruya herself commented. Even though the suggested change was clearly advantageous to her, she couldn’t keep quiet.

“I am,” Stella responded with a comfortable tone and benign smile. “Tardiness is a major error, often punishable by immediate disqualification. With that in mind, this penalty seems a lot tamer—but only if everyone else agrees to it, of course.”

Though Stella spoke with great composure, behind her, Ikki was growing paler by the second.

This is really bad! What made it such an issue was more than just the ridiculous proposal itself. The real problem came in the form of the three block B victors who would join the battle as a result of the penalty. *They’re all from Akatsuki! They’d never miss an opportunity like this!*

Most other representatives would likely have never agreed to such a proposal. In their minds, there was no point in throwing themselves in front of a Rank A bus for Tsuruya just because they’d won. The knights from Akatsuki Academy, however, were different. They were anti-Federation mercenaries hired for the sole purpose of conquering the Seven Stars Battle Festival, so there was no reason for them to care about the method. All they needed was for one of them to reach the finals.

With victory being their only goal, their best plan would be to get Ouma, a Rank A like Stella and probably the strongest knight in all of Akatsuki Academy, into the finals. If they could use the clear advantage the proposed rule change gave them to defeat the person who would likely give him the most trouble, then they had no reason to refuse. It was their best chance to crush her, and they weren’t the type to let such an offer go to waste.

“Heheheh. Well, isn’t this interesting?” Reisen Hiraga, who had been listening to the discussion from among the crowd, proved Ikki’s expectation correct. He laughed with joy as he watched his strongest opponent spell her own demise. “In an event where every contestant presents a major obstacle, you propose a four-on-one battle as your trial. Truly, you are the legendary Crimson Princess. Your pride is unmatched.”

He leaped down from the stands, landing next to Mikoto Tsuruya.

“That’s some big talk from a beast with no merit other than raw strength.”

“Heh-heh-heh. You can’t take that back now, princess of blood.”

With provocations of their own, two more warriors descended to stand beside Hiraga: Yui Tatara, the Unflinching assassin with her face hidden by a thick coat, and Rinna Kazamatsuri, the Beast Tamer straddling her black lion. Their actions clearly revealed their answer.

“We Akatsuki Academy students take no issue with this,” Hiraga stated. “We’ll lend our strength for the sake of a fair tournament.”

“A-All right, then. Your thoughts, Tsuruya?” Kaieda asked.

“I-I have no complaints, either.”

The reason for Tsuruya’s hesitant response was that not even she wanted such unusually favorable circumstances. Still, agreement was agreement.

“Hmm.”

With the unanimous agreement of the contestants, Kaieda closed his eyes and furrowed his brow deeply.

“Hey, why are you thinking so hard?! There’s no way you’re allowing this insane penalty, right?!”

“Four-on-one isn’t a fair match at all! It’s basically just a public execution!”

“But Stella’s the one who asked for it.”

“C’mon, let ’em do it!”

While Kaieda deliberated, the crowd reached a fever pitch. As if prodded with curiosity by the bizarre rule set Stella proposed, a large number of spectators’ distaste at Tsuruya’s demand of a penalty shifted to a positive attitude toward the special rules. The result was that many people began bickering over their differing opinions. However, after about a minute of their arguing, Kaieda opened his eyes and made his declaration as the leader of the management committee.

“Very well. If the fighters have no objections, then we will permit Stella’s rule change as the penalty for her match.”

“For real?!”

“What is the committee thinking?!”

“Order! Order! Adding to the rules per the agreement of both fighters is not an uncommon occurrence at the Seven Stars Battle Festival, where you student knights are the main actors. It is true that I find this penalty to be rather harsh, but as Stella herself proposed it, we will accept it.” Using his words to silence the part of the crowd that booed at him, Kaieda once again spoke with the two fighters.

“Now, to confirm the rules. For Stella Vermillion to claim victory, she must defeat not only Tsuruya, but also the remaining block B members: Hiraga, Kazamatsuri, and Tatara. For Tsuruya to claim victory, she or one of her allies must defeat Stella. Is this acceptable?”

“Sounds good to me.”

“Yes. I appreciate your lenience, sir.”

Both of them consented to the rule change, meaning that the management committee's job was done.

"Great. Now then, Iida, it's all yours."

"Huh? O-Oh, yeah."

Kaieda returned control to the play-by-play announcer and disappeared from the screen. Iida was visibly flustered at first by the nonsensical affair, but he quickly recovered the vigor he displayed during Ikki's match and led the venue onward. "W-Well, we have certainly witnessed something incredible. I've done play-by-play and analysis for a very long time, but I've never seen a four-on-one formal battle. Nevertheless, the contestants have agreed and the committee has permitted it. Thus, I will continue to see my job through! Now, let us begin block B's fourth match: Stella Vermillion versus Mikoto Tsuruya! Both fighters, along with the guest fighters, please gather in the arena!"

"Off I go, then. You seem tired, so you can go take a nap if you want. This match won't be worth watching, I promise."

On receiving Iida's order, Stella turned back to Ikki one last time and left him with those bold words. Though she would be up against a quarterfinalist from the previous year as well as three underground mercenaries, she grinned like a child heading to the carnival. Ikki didn't understand it in the slightest.

"Stella, why are you taking such a needless risk?" he asked. If she'd kept quiet, she would have had no penalty. No matter what angle he looked at it from, Stella's actions didn't seem to benefit her in any way, shape, or form. Asking her why was his only chance of figuring it out. "Are you positive that you can win against all four of them together?"

This question prompted Stella to shake her head in refusal.

"Well, I dunno. At least, I don't think I can say I'm 'positive', especially since I still don't know what kind of powers they have."

"Then why...?"

"This is the only thing I can do," she muttered, looking up at the tournament brackets displayed on the screen following the end of Kaieda's transmission. She seemed annoyed by block B's first matchup of round two. "At this rate, round two will put Hiraga and Kazamatsuri up against each other. They're both from Akatsuki, so if that happens, one of them is definitely going to forfeit. I can't let that happen."

That was the obvious conclusion. As Akatsuki was a group of mercenaries working as a unit rather than a normal school, they had not the slightest interest in personal glory at Seven Stars. For that reason, they wouldn't do anything to hurt their allies and thus their chances of winning. There was no doubt that either Pierrot or Beast

Tamer would bow out of the second round, allowing the other to advance without having to fight.

“Stella...”

It made sense why Stella was so gladly putting herself through the wringer the way she was. The reason wasn't any sort of neat, royal family nonsense like she'd explained to Kaieda; she had only one goal.

“I won't let those Akatsuki goons get away with hurting us, our friends, and our school so badly. Not a chance,” she growled like a bubbling volcano just before an eruption. Touka, Ayatsuji, and all the others had been hurt. Stella would be the one to avenge her friends. “I'll burn every last one of them to ash.”

Acting in concord with the rage she had suppressed ever since the attack, always unable to vent her anger, Stella's crimson hair glowed like flames, scattering embers through the air as she began walking toward the arena. As she did, she stared fixedly at the members of Akatsuki, who had already gathered in the ring.

Watching her head their way, Ikki thought that she was a little too hot-headed, but he didn't have the energy to stop her—especially not when she was angry for the sake of her friends. So, instead of saying anything, he simply stayed put, quietly seeing her off.

All I can do now is believe in her. He had to believe in the power she'd gained from her training with Ms. Saikyou. *Go get 'em, Stella.*

“Now, the wait is over! Block B's fourth match finally begins! Let's go ahead!”

With that declaration, the curtain rose on an unprecedented match.



Afterword

Thank you for reading volume five of *Chivalry of a Failed Knight*. I'm the author, Riku Misora.

I'm writing this afterword in July. As ever, Japanese summers are just so hot and humid. It feels like they never end! My room doesn't have any air conditioning or fans, so it's a terrible environment to work in during the middle of summer.

But there's only one month left! In one month, I'll be moving out of the home I've lived in since elementary school, securing my very own air conditioning and television! Woohoo!

Even better, I'll be able to have a pet at my new home. I'm very excited for that. I want a kitty-cat so badly. I'll probably make the next afterword all about my new cat. It's *my* afterword, after all.

So! In this volume, the Seven Stars Battle Festival has finally begun. Just as Ikki overcomes his first major hurdle, Stella causes an unexpected twist. Will the two of them be able to make it through this Festival, full of powerful fighters, and meet in the finals? In hopes that you'll continue to watch over them and their struggles, I'll do my very best to keep on writing.

Now then, to the editor who helped me polish up this book, and to Won, who always makes the most wonderful illustrations, and even to you, the readers who continue to support *Chivalry of a Failed Knight*, thank you so much as always. I hope you continue to enjoy my works.

1. Cover
2. Color Illustrations
3. Prologue: The Drums of War
4. Chapter 1: National Powerhouses
5. Chapter 2: The Star of Naniwa
6. Chapter 3: The Seven Stars Begins!
7. Chapter 4: Decisive Battle
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